Hidden Knots

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Summary

To the outside observer, Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter seem to have nothing in common: one is a penniless migrant accused of murder, the other a wealthy doctor and a pillar of his community.

In truth, Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter are just alike. They are killers who long to show their true face, but are held back by the same shared uncertainty: have they fallen in love with a mask, or the man hiding behind it?

Notes

Hi everyone! I accidentally posted a working draft of this yesterday which I have since deleted, but for those of you who saw it: thanks for the kudos/comments!! :)

The setting of this fic was loosely inspired by "The Fall", "The Grapes of Wrath", and "It Happened One Night." The themes and motifs were all inspired by a trip I took to the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, which is one of the coolest places I've ever been. If you ever find yourself in Los Angeles with an afternoon to kill, I highly recommend checking it out. It's a place that I think Fannibals are uniquely qualified to enjoy :).

This will be longer than my previous Hannigram fics have been, so please bear with me while I work through it. Comments and kudos are much appreciated. Thank you!!

Prologue

Abigail is very good at keeping secrets.

She's known her father's secrets for years, and even though he's dead now she still won't tell them to anyone. Not a single soul.

She knows the other kids' secrets too. She knows because she hides behind cots and curtains at the Verger Family Orphanage and listens to Miss Verger and Mrs. Lecter whisper back and forth about the children who live there. And even though sometimes the other kids laugh at her, shove her in the dirt and call her names, Abigail won't tell their secrets to anyone. Not a single soul.

She knows Doctor Chilton's secrets, too. She knows his secrets because she spends weeks in his little infirmary at the orphanage, watching him check his reflection in the mirror and write love letters to Mrs. Lecter. Abigail doesn't like the food at the orphanage, doesn't like how the meat tastes rotten and sickly, nothing like the meat her father used to serve at their table, so she gets sick a lot. And even though Doctor Chilton doesn't listen to her pleas when she's crying, and tells her that she's lucky to be getting any food at all, she won't tell his secrets to anyone. Not a single soul.

She knows Miss Verger's secrets, too. She knows her secrets because she watches Miss Verger stare at Mrs. Lecter for longer than she should, sees her nervously adjust her hair and reapply lipstick on the days that Mrs. Lecter is supposed to visit. And even though Miss Verger is too weak to stand up to her brother, and doesn't do anything when Mr. Verger pulls toddlers by the hair and makes them cry, Abigail won't tell her secrets to anyone. Not a single soul.

She knows Mister Will's secrets, too. Or, some of them, at least. But Mister Will is a lot like her, and so she knows that he has a lot of secrets too - maybe too many for one person to have. But that's okay. Mister Will is the nicest person she's ever met, and he doesn't make her feel ashamed of her scar or her shaking hands. He plays cat's cradle with her and tells her stories, and sometimes he brings freshly-caught fish to the orphanage so that she has something to eat. And even though people tell her that Mister Will is dangerous, and that he might be a murderer, she'll never tell his secrets to anyone. Not a single soul.

Abigail even knows Doctor Lecter's secrets, the secrets he hides behind the mask that covers his whole body. She knows he doesn't love Mrs. Lecter, at least not the way he loves Mister Will. She knows because she saw him kissing Mister Will, once, in the hallway of the hospital at night, and it was different from the way he kisses Mrs. Lecter. If Mister Will is around, Doctor Lecter pretends to be looking at other things, but really he isn't. And even when Mister Will isn't around, most of the time Doctor Lecter is thinking about him then, too. And even though it's wrong for a married man to be in love with someone who isn't his wife, Abigail will never tell his secrets to anyone. Not a single soul.

Abigail knows her own secrets too, of course, although there are some days she wishes that she didn't. And even though Miss Verger tells her that she might stop being scared all the time if she talked about what happened, and that her dad might stop visiting her if she told the truth, Abigail will never tell her secrets to anyone. Not a single soul.

Abigail is very good at keeping secrets.

Order and Disorder

W.

Will didn't mean to kill the guy. Then again, he never really does. It always just sort of happens. One minute he's minding his own business, trawling through the juniper and chaparral bushes outside of Redlands, California, and the next thing he knows there's a corpse sprawled out at his feet. What happens in between feels more like a fever dream than anything he actually experiences, and it's no different tonight. He'd been aware that the man was shouting at him in a language he couldn't understand - possibly Italian? - and that he'd pulled a gun before being leveled with a punch to the stomach, but other than that it's hazy. It was a sloppy kill, really, even more so than usual, and now that it's over Will finds himself wishing he could do it over again, if only to make it a more meaningful experience for both of them.

The man's neck is twisted at an unnatural angle, his arms and legs all akimbo, and his corpse reminds Will of nothing so much as a jumble of old wires. He doesn't like the way that looking at it makes him feel, the rush of adrenaline giving way to an uneasy thrumming beneath his skin, and so he drags the body to a nearby orange tree and leans it again the trunk, folding its fingers together over its lap and tilting the lolling head skyward. It's a clear night, and Cassiopeia is bright overhead, so Will fixes the man's sightless eyes toward her brightness in supplication. There you go, Cassie, he thinks, another admirer for you, and he steps away to survey his work. It's not perfect, but it will do. That being done, he keeps walking.

Will hasn't been in Redlands long, and he certainly hadn't meant to kill anyone during his time here. He's been on the road for months, ever since that sheriff in Virginia got a little too close to catching him for comfort, and Will feels like it's been weeks since he stood still. The euphoria he usually gets from killing now feels like little more than a pinprick of sensation, and he realizes belatedly that he hasn't eaten anything in three days. He needs to do better, he thinks, but it's so easy to be distracted. By the smell of the air, for instance, unlike anything he's ever smelled before: woody and dry and hot even in the middle of the night. Or by the sound of the dirt crunching under his boots, rhythmic and steady and soothing. Or by the sudden appearance of a road, and beside it an enormous billboard, lit up like a beacon in the blackness of the night. "VERGER FAMILY ORANGE GROVES" it reads, and Will takes a moment to study the cartoon face of a man with tousled hair, pink cheeks, and squinting eyes smiling beside the logo. Will thinks that even in cartoon form the man looks like a maniac. He's none too sad to leave the billboard behind.

The road stretches on and on, and Will trudges down it dutifully. There are no cars out at this time of night, and he realizes suddenly that he has no memory of where he parked his truck. He thinks this should cause him more alarm than it does, but he can't seem to reach the emotion - it's tucked away on a high shelf in his mind, and he seems to have misplaced his stepladder. And so he keeps walking, taking deep, even breaths, and he tries to keep his mind

focused. Where is he? Why did he start walking? Where is he going? Did he kill someone tonight? There are no answers to his questions, just the steady sound of his feet and the smell of the dry, woody air. Will feels like a spool of thread unraveling, his mind sending tendrils of thought out in all directions like strings. Should he have hidden the body? What was that song that was playing in the diner in Colorado three weeks ago? When was the last time he had a drink of water? *Disorder, disorder*, he thinks, and then suddenly he stops walking. He's reached a sign that reads "WELCOME TO REDLANDS, CA - CITRUS CAPITAL OF THE USA", and he's decided that this is as good a place as any to sleep. And so he sprawls out beneath the sign, his hands under his head, and he turns his eyes to the sky. He wonders distantly if this is a bad idea, but he can't bring himself to move. Cassiopeia has moved since the incident with the corpse; by now she has nearly completed her nightly journey, and Will decides that he has completed his too.

Goodnight, Cassie, he thinks, and he is asleep within moments.

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H.

There is a beautiful order to Hannibal's life. He wakes up every morning at exactly the same time, and he completes his morning ablutions before the sun rises. He fixes himself breakfast (usually eggs, sausage, bread, and fresh-squeezed orange juice), and he sets aside a plate for Alana to eat after she wakes. After breakfast, he packs his lunch with whatever is most fresh and abundant from his garden, and then he drives to the hospital as the sun is rising. He spends the drive in quiet reflection, and he relishes the sight of the white adobe hospital standing stark against the pink-orange sky. He meets with Doctor Sutcliffe to discuss any events that transpired during his shift the previous night, and then he does rounds to check in with all of the nurses and their patients. Each step occurs like finely-tuned clockwork, like ballet, and it lends a beautiful symmetry to Hannibal's days.

He imagines his life laid out like a book embellished with fine gold leaf: each day a page, meticulous and artfully organized down to the smallest detail. It has been years since he last tasted disorder, since last he sipped that intoxicating nectar, and he has not forgotten what it nearly cost him. He has learned to dislike surprises. He has learned to dislike breaks in his routine. And he has learned to dislike it when the first thing he sees upon arriving at the hospital is a tear in the fabric of his day. Today, that tear manifests in the form of a visibly nervous Doctor Sutcliffe, greeting him the moment he opens his car door.

"Good morning, Doctor Sutcliffe," Hannibal says, congenial despite the aberration. "Is everything alright?"

"Good morning, Doctor Lecter," Sutcliffe responds, smoothing his hands over his coat as they make their way toward the entryway. "Nothing is wrong, *per se*, it's just that-" he pauses

as he holds the door open for Hannibal.

“Yes?” Hannibal says, keeping his voice even and warm.

“Sheriff Crawford is here,” Sutcliffe says as the door closes behind them. “I let him in. He’s interrogating one of our patients.”

Hannibal draws in a deep breath. Ah.

“Doctor Sutcliffe, I believe we have discussed at length my feelings about the privacy of our patients,” Hannibal says, careful not to let his irritation creep into his voice. Sutcliffe clears his throat.

“Yes, I know, Hannibal, it’s just - he said it was an extenuating circumstance. Why make him get a warrant when this guy is their primary suspect? What if he’s guilty? Do we want him in our hospital?”

“Who is the patient?” Hannibal asks, his frustration making his politeness slip.

“He says his name is Will Graham,” Sutcliffe responds. “He came in overnight. Some woman and her kid found him sleeping by the highway. Really, Hannibal, the guy seems dangerous. We don’t know anything about his-”

“What is his condition?”

“You mean physically? Ah, just dehydration and malnourishment, and fatigue, from what I can tell. No signs of alcohol or fever. But like I was saying, from what Sheriff Crawford says he could be a very dangerous-”

“And what crime did this man allegedly commit?”

Doctor Sutcliffe stops walking outside a closed door and lowers his voice. “Murder,” he says gravely. “Cold-blooded murder. One of Mason Verger’s guards was killed last night and left in the orange grove. Sheriff Crawford thinks this guy did it.”

“Based on what evidence?” Hannibal asks, his voice clipped, and Sutcliffe’s face twists.

“How should I know?” he asks. “And frankly, who cares? I just want the guy out of our hospital. As far as I’m concerned, Sheriff Crawford is more than welcome here.”

Hannibal feels a simmering anger spread through his limbs. He likes Jack Crawford, but he does not like Jack Crawford’s tendency to ignore boundaries and bulldoze his way into places he does not belong. He likes Doctor Sutcliffe, but he does not like Doctor Sutcliffe’s tendency to be influenced by people who ignore boundaries and bulldoze their way into places they do not belong. He does not like that the two of them have conspired to cause an unnecessary break in his routine.

“The patient is in this room,” Sutcliffe says after a moment, “I thought it would be best to move him to a private room, given the allegations against him.” He looks to Hannibal as if for approval, and, were Hannibal feeling more charitable, he would have given him a

gracious nod. But Hannibal is not feeling charitable, so instead he simply knocks on the closed door to alert the patient and Jack Crawford of their presence. “Again, Hannibal, I know you don’t like it when Sheriff Crawford is here, but I used my judgment and decided that I-”

“Your judgment does not supersede hospital policy,” Hannibal says curtly. “You are not the head doctor at this institution, Doctor Sutcliffe, I am. I have been more than clear about this.”

Sutcliffe’s face folds into a frown. “It’s a matter of safety, Hannibal. How can we-”

“We can discuss this later, Doctor Sutcliffe,” Hannibal says, finally reaching the end of his patience, and he makes his way through the door.

He needs to talk to Jack Crawford.

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W.

The Righteous Sheriff is a bulldog, and intelligent, if bewilderingly obtuse. He looms beside Will’s cot as if his hulking presence alone will force a confession out of him, and Will can’t help but pity him. No doubt he means well - probably considers himself a fearless soldier for justice, to boot - but his arrogance makes him blind. He’ll never catch Will, and so Will is not inclined to take him seriously. He’s relieved by the sound of a knock on the door, if only because it means he’ll be getting a momentary reprieve from the brunt force of the Sheriff’s scowl. It’s tedious.

Two men enter the room following the knock, Doctor Sutcliffe and a man Will presumes must be another doctor. He’s tall and broad-shouldered and immaculately put-together. He’s also fucking gorgeous, Will thinks, but that is neither here nor there given the circumstances.

“Hello Jack,” the doctor says, extending a hand with a smile that is all charm and ease, “it’s wonderful to see you again.”

Will watches as the Righteous Sheriff’s shoulders loosen slightly, as his posture changes and his face becomes more open. *He thinks he’s in the presence of a friend*, Will realizes, and he stores that information away for later use.

“Hello, Doctor Lecter,” the Sheriff booms, catching the doctor’s hand in a firm grip. “Not sure what Doctor Sutcliffe here has told you,” he says, “but I think we’ve got a killer on our hands.”

“A killer,” the new doctor says evenly, “how extraordinary.” Will resists the urge to laugh.

“I know, Doctor Lecter, I know,” the Sheriff says, seemingly unaware of the man’s flat affect. “We live in truly dangerous times. But rest assured, I'm doing all I can to keep you and your charming wife safe."

Wife, Will thinks. That’s a shame. But then again, he’s heard that one before.

“Of course, Jack,” the doctor says, “I have the utmost respect for your work. But I’m afraid that I'm going to have to ask that you postpone it until this patient has been discharged. As we have discussed, a hospital is a place of sanctuary, and this patient is protected here.”

Will watches as the Righteous Sheriff’s smiles grows tight, watches as he drums his fingers against the rough cloth of his trousers.

“Doctor Lecter, you have to understand - these are extenuating circumstances,” he says. “There is a cold-blooded killer on the loose, someone with no respect for the sanctity of human life. I think that cold-blooded killer is right here in this room with us. You’re asking me to leave him here? I’m not sure I can do that.”

At this point Will feels he has to interject.

“What evidence do you have against me?” he asks, and he feels the sudden weight of Doctor Lecter’s eyes on his face, followed by the Sheriff’s weighty scowl.

“A man is murdered in cold blood, his body left propped up against an orange tree on the outskirts of Mason Verger’s orange groves, and then a strange man from out of town is found sleeping under a sign less than five miles away from where that man was killed. Are you saying that doesn’t sound suspicious to you?” he asks, and Will resists the urge to roll his eyes.

“That’s just shoddy police work, Sheriff,” he says. “There’s a migrant camp in this town with over three hundred people in it, coming and going all the time. And wouldn’t it have made more sense for whoever did it to flee town? If I’m your killer, why would I be stupid enough to fall asleep so close to the crime scene? It doesn’t make any sense.”

From the corner of his eye, Will sees Doctor Sutcliffe shift nervously on his feet. The Sheriff’s face has become a fearsome glower.

“Are you questioning my ability to do my job, Mister Graham?” he asks, and Will raises his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

“Not at all, Sheriff,” he says, “I’m just asking you to consider the bigger picture.”

“The only picture *I* need, Will Graham,” the Sheriff says, stepping closer, “is you in a holding cell until we gather enough evidence to convict you.”

“Jack,” Doctor Lecter says, moving alongside the Righteous Sheriff’s hulking mass, “you are here without a warrant. You have no evidence against this man. Will Graham is currently a patient here, and he’s under the protection of the hospital. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

The Sheriff draws in a shaking breath. “Hannibal, you have to understand,” he grits out, “this man-”

Hannibal, Will muses. *There’s a name you don’t hear everyday*.

“Listen to the Good Doctor, Jack,” Will says cheerfully, “I won’t be here forever. You can come find me then.”

The Sheriff seems to waver for a moment, to consider further resistance, but then he deflates. He turns back to Will with a glare.

“Rest assured, Graham,” he says, “if you try to run, it’s not me you have to worry about finding you.”

Will raises an eyebrow at that, but the Sheriff doesn’t elaborate. The Good Doctor clears his throat.

“Shall I walk you to your car, Jack?” he asks, and the Sheriff nods.

“Thank you, Hannibal,” he says stiffly. “I would appreciate that very much.”

Doctor Lecter nods and gestures toward the door. “After you,” he says, and Doctor Sutcliffe eyes Will nervously as the men walk away.

“The nurse will be in shortly to see if you need anything,” he says awkwardly, his fear palpable. He is more easily influenced than Doctor Lecter. Will gives him a beatific smile.

“I sure do appreciate it, Doctor,” he says, and Doctor Sutcliffe swallows.

“I have to go see to my other patients,” he stutters, and Will leans his head back against the thin pillow.

“Thought your shift was over, Doc,” he says, wishing the man would leave, and the doctor gives a nervous laugh.

“Oh - oh, yes, you’re right,” he says, “I - in that case, I’ll be going. I suppose I’ll see you later tonight,” he stammers, and Will waves a hand carelessly.

“Looking forward to it,” he says, and he presses his palms against his eyes as the man makes a desperate flight towards the door.

Will stares at the darkness behind his eyelids, and he wonders where Cassiopeia is now.

The Girl in the Garden

Chapter Notes

> Thanks so much to everyone who kudosed and commented! I spent the last several days outlining this story and I have it plotted out through the end. I'm very excited about where the story is going to go - I hope you enjoy it too!

H.

Will Graham is having a nightmare. Hannibal can smell his sweat from down the hallway, a sharp and surprisingly alluring scent. There are other things he should be doing, to be sure: checking on patients, updating the hospital's log to reflect its most recent occupancy changes, reviewing inventory records to ensure that all necessary supplies are adequately stocked. But instead he is here, frozen in place by the presence of an unexpected scent in the air.

What to do?

Should he resume his planned activities, attempt a return to normalcy, or should he bow down in obeisance to the siren call of his curiosity?

In the end, his feet seem to make his decision for him, guiding him forward down the long hallway and into the small room of his newest patient before his mind reaches a conscious decision. It is a break in his routine, and perhaps even a loss of self-control, but he finds that he is immeasurably curious about Will Graham.

Could this man have committed murder? he asks himself as he draws closer to the bed. Earlier that morning, when Will had gone head-to-head with Jack Crawford on little to no sleep without so much as breaking eye contact, Hannibal might have been inclined to say yes. But now - now that Will Graham is sleeping, his body glistening with sweat and his lips parted in abject terror, with his pulse fluttering in his throat and small animal noises escaping from his mouth - Hannibal wonders if perhaps he was wrong. He takes a seat in the chair beside Will Graham's bed and studies him.

What a fascinating creature.

Will Graham is young - he can't be more than 35 or 36, by Hannibal's reckoning - and yet there is an air of unwellness that clings to him like a veil. Here, in the bright white light of early afternoon, the man's paleness stands out in stark contrast to the dark brown curls plastered to his forehead, and Hannibal wonders if perhaps he is a spirit from one of his nursemaid's old folk tales. The skin beneath Will Graham's eyes and at his neck looks thin,

gleaming like gossamer and threaded with small blue veins tracing like strings beneath the epidermis. He is lean in a way that belies not a healthy vitality but rather a lack of adequate nutrition, and Hannibal thinks suddenly that he would like to feed him, that it would only take a month at Hannibal's table before the man's body filled out to an adequate suppleness.

Could Will Graham have killed someone? he asks himself again. He looks at Will Graham's hands: they are adequately portioned to his body and, thus, not overlarge; his shoulders are compact, his overall physique slim and small. No doubt there could be power hidden there, a swift sort of deadliness, Hannibal thinks, but what sort of a killer would Will Graham be, that he would leave his victim so carelessly and fall asleep out in the open? In all the years that Hannibal indulged in the delicious hobby of murder, he never dreamt of being so careless, of being so disorderly, of leaving himself so open to risk. *What sort of killer overlooks such details?* he wonders, and a thrill moves through his body as he considers it. Perhaps the sort of killer without a plan, he thinks, a mixture of curiosity and revulsion coiling together in his gut. Perhaps the sort of killer who strikes at whim - who responds to his basest urges as they come, without thought to fate or circumstance.

What a fascinating prospect.

What a beguiling possibility, like a sudden burst of color in the pristine white landscape of Hannibal's life.

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W.

The clock on the wall says four p.m. when Will finally wakes up. There's a glass of water by his bed and his blankets are utterly soaked, but otherwise everything is as it was before he fell asleep. He feels disgusting and he has to piss, so he staggers to his feet and over to the small bathroom attached to his room. There's no soap in the shower, so he makes do with rinsing off and scrubbing his fingers through his hair. He finds his clothes freshly laundered and folded on the chair next to his bed, and putting them on feels like slipping back into his own skin. He drops the soaked gown in a basket by the door.

The sight of the rank cot makes Will's stomach twist, so he turns his back on it and makes his way out into the hallway. Nurses shuffle past him without any sign of concern, so he supposes the news about Jack Crawford's visit must not have spread. He also supposes that he has the Good Doctor to thank for that.

A man who sticks to his principles, Will thinks. *There's a rare thing in this world.*

At the end of the hallway there is a wooden door, thrown open onto what appears to be a rose garden. Will stops to survey the scene outside, where the white-hot sunlight casts dramatic

shadows on the ground beneath the leaves and branches. The bushes are enormous, verging on overgrown, but their blooms are riotous in their beauty. Will steps through the doorway and makes his way over to them, reaching careful fingers out and caressing the velvety surface of one the blooms. It's a mottled pink and white, its scent heavy and cloying in the stifling air. For a moment Will feels suspended, held immobile by the thickness of the air and strung like a marionette from the the smoldering heat of the sun at his back. He closes his eyes and allows himself to get lost in the stillness and the peace that surrounds him. There are doves cooing gently somewhere to his right, and he thinks for a moment that he might fall asleep on his feet, but instead he's pulled from his trance by the sound of shifting gravel.

"Be careful of the thorns," a small voice says, and Will jerks his head to find a young girl watching him from the shade by the hospital wall. Ringneck doves mill around her skinny body, seemingly unperturbed by her presence, and Will feels himself smile as he comes back to himself.

"Hi," he says, and he gestures to the doves. "These your friends?" he asks, and the girl nods.

"I think so," she says, turning to face the dove nearest to her, which has settled itself into a contented oblong mere inches from her knee. "I like their markings," she continues, and Will thinks this is an odd thing to say until he notices she is touching fluttering fingers to her own neck, where a shiny pink scar is carved like a smirk against her pale skin. Will feels his stomach lurch. The girl can't be more than six or seven years old. He lowers himself down on his haunches so that he is eye-level with her.

"I think their markings are beautiful," he says slowly, thinking that whoever put that scar there must have done so on purpose. "It's what makes them unique from other birds."

The girl's mouth twists at that, thoughtful, but then she smiles slightly and turns her eyes to Will. They are very wide. "My name's Abigail," she says. "What's yours?"

"Will," he says. "Will Graham."

The girl blinks rapidly, presses her lips together. She looks nervous, as though trying to build up her courage. She draws in a breath.

"Would you like to play a game, Mister Graham?" she asks, and Will grins.

"Well that depends," he says, "what kind of game?"

Abigail gestures to a pile of string resting in her lap. "Cat's cradle."

"Alright," Will says, moving forward on his knees. "As long as you promise not to cheat."

Abigail smiles again, a small thing, fleeting, but there. "I never cheat, Mister Graham," she tells him, and she lifts the string from her lap. Will moves slowly, wary of frightening the doves, but they don't seem to mind him either, simply shuffling out of his path and re-establishing themselves in a circle around the two of them once he is settled.

“They like you,” Abigail tells him as the doves resume their cooing. She begins to twist the string, and Will notices that her hands are shaking. Her brows are knit with concentration, her eyes focused on her trembling fingers in their movements, and Will feels his heart ache for her.

“So, what should I do?” he asks, and after several moments Abigail lifts her hands, the string now woven into a net-like pattern between her fingers. The string is quivering, slightly, in the open air.

“I’m going to try to trap you,” she says. “Make your hand into a fist, and then put it through the center.”

“Are you a hunter, Abigail?” Will asks, his tone jesting, but the girl does not smile.

“Sometimes,” she says evenly, and Will considers his response as he moves his fist between the string. He thinks of the scar on Abigail’s neck and he wonders how much fear she lives with, every single moment of every single day.

Will knows what it’s like to live with constant fear: the way it spreads itself like a poison through all your veins and capillaries, how it can make you feel like all there is in the world is you and the lingering threat always on the periphery of your vision; how it invades your thoughts and makes you feel like you are rotting from the inside out. Will knows fear, he knows it *intimately*, and he knows that this girl doesn’t deserve to live with it. He wishes he could take Abigail’s fear away from her.

“Me too,” he finally settles on, and that earns him another small smile. “So what do I do now?” he asks, and Abigail looks down at the cat’s cradle.

“You wait,” she says quietly. “A good hunter can strike anytime. You always have to be alert if you don’t want to get caught.”

Her voice is even, words spoken as if by rote, and Will feels his brow crease before he notices the slightest movement of the string against his wrist. Without thinking he’s pulled his hand free, and the cat’s cradle closes around empty space. Will falters for a moment, his throat thick with guilt. He’d meant to let Abigail win, but some hard-wired instinct had acted on his behalf, had sensed the trap and lunged away from it. He opens his mouth to apologize, until he realizes that Abigail is laughing, the doves ruffling their wings in consternation at the abrupt sound.

“Good job!” she says, letting her shaking hands fall. “You’re the only person I haven’t caught.” She seems to have forgotten her nervousness in her excitement.

Will lets out an awkward laugh, thinking to himself that he’s probably just the only asshole who wouldn’t let a little girl win a children’s game. “I guess so,” he says, and Abigail’s face becomes serious again.

“A good hunter can sense a trap,” she says earnestly, a line forming between her eyebrows. “Are you a good hunter, Mister Graham?” she asks, her fingers tugging nervously at the string in her lap. “You won’t get trapped, will you?”

For lack of a better response, Will shakes his head. “No, Abigail,” he says, “I won’t get trapped.”

Abigail presses her lips together and nods, the line between her eyebrows disappearing. “Good,” she says, her fingers beginning to untangle the string, and then the quiet stillness of the garden is broken by the sound of a third voice.

“Abigail!” it cries, and it is followed by the heavy steps of a matronly nurse passing through the doorway and out into the garden. The doves startle at the intrusion and they rise in tandem, fluttering on whistling wings and coming to rest on the roof as the nurse makes her way to Abigail’s side. “It’s almost time for dinner, Abigail,” she scolds. “You know you’re not supposed to be out here this late. Come on, come back inside.”

“I’m sorry, Nurse,” Abigail says dully, and she rises to stand. She shifts on her feet, presses her lips together and squares her shoulders. She turns to Will. “It was nice to meet you, Mister Graham,” she tells him, earnestly, before quickly turning away and slipping trembling fingers into the nurse’s hand. She looks back over her shoulder as she is being led away, and Will gives her a smile and a wave.

“It was nice meeting you, Abigail!” he calls, and her face spreads in another small smile. The nurse spares Will a scowl before shuffling Abigail through the doorway, and suddenly Will finds himself alone in the garden.

He has no appetite and no real interest in going back inside, so for a moment Will considers simply leaving. But then he remembers the Sheriff’s words - “It’s not me you have to worry about finding you” - and he decides that perhaps it’s best he stay at the hospital for now, and gather more information before he lights back out onto the open road.

Besides, it’s not like I have anywhere else to be, he thinks, and he shifts so that he is leaning back against the cool adobe wall, tilting his head and closing his eyes. Several minutes pass this way until he hears the fluttering of wings around him, and he opens his eyes to find that the doves have returned, settling themselves around him like a fairy ring and resuming their quiet cooing and pecking at the earth. *Why does it feel like all I ever want to do is sleep?* Will wonders distantly, but he doesn’t give it much more thought than that before he drifts into unconsciousness, hemmed in by the hot, heady air of the garden and the quiet settling sounds of the birds.

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H.

Will Graham is not in his room. Hannibal hovers in the doorway, holding the bag of food and staring at the freshly-laundered bed, and he wonders if perhaps the man had thought to make

a quick escape earlier in the afternoon. He finds that he is worryingly disappointed by this prospect, and he steps out of the doorway and down the hall toward his office with the intent of notifying Jack Crawford. However, he is stopped in his tracks by the sight of an unexpected presence in the rose garden. Will Graham is sleeping there with his back against the white adobe wall, his head lolling at an angle and his mouth open. He seems to be sleeping peacefully now, his body cast in shadow and his slender legs hemmed in by doves. It's a scene of such breathtaking beauty that Hannibal wishes he'd brought his sketchbook, and he tries to commit it to memory before the vision fades. He stands for several moments simply observing before he moves again, and when at last he steps out into the garden he does so carefully, trying not to make a great deal of noise. However, despite his efforts, the doves startle awake and flutter away at his approach, and the whistling cacophony of their wings in turn wakes Will Graham, who returns to wakefulness with a lurch and an alarmed glance around him.

"Good evening, Mister Graham," Hannibal greets cheerfully, and Will Graham blinks several times before responding.

"Evening, Doc," he finally says, his voice gravelly. He rubs his fingers against his eyes and draws in a breath. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" he asks, and Hannibal wonders suddenly if he has awoken Will Graham from a dream.

"I brought you dinner," he says, gesturing to the bag. "The nurses tell me you haven't eaten."

"Ah," Will says, and he presses himself further upright with a grimace. "That's real thoughtful of you, Doc."

Hannibal clears his throat. "Yes, well, you are malnourished," he says. "It is incumbent on me as your doctor to ensure that you are receiving adequate nutrition."

This is all true. However, it is also true that the dinner Hannibal is serving Will Graham did not come from the hospital kitchen, but rather is a meal that Hannibal made himself in his own kitchen and brought back to the hospital after his shift ended. He does not tell this to Will Graham.

Will Graham stares at him, his brow creasing slightly and a slow smile spreading across his face. "And here I thought you just wanted to have dinner with me," he says, and he rises to his feet with a hand against the wall.

"I've already eaten," Hannibal says delicately, and Will Graham grunts.

"Fair enough. So, where are we eating, Doc?" he asks, and Hannibal gestures to a small table on the far side of the rose bushes.

"We can eat here, if you would like," he says. "You seem to enjoy being out-of-doors."

Will Graham shrugs and makes his way over to the table, trailing fingers over pink-and-white blooms as he goes. "You'll find I'm not too particular," he says, and he sits down.

Hannibal unpacks the contents of his bag methodically: the Thermos of fresh-squeezed orange juice first, followed by the metal canister of roast chicken with lemon and potatoes and then the smaller canister of wilted summer squash and spinach. He opens each container and places them in front of Will Graham, followed by a knife, fork, and a cloth napkin, and then at last he seats himself. He finds that Will Graham is staring at him.

“Doc, where’d you get all this food?” he asks, and Hannibal folds his hands on the surface of the table. For some reason, he feels no inclination to lie.

“My home,” he says. “I have an extensive garden, and I raise my own chickens.”

Will Graham lets out a long breath through his teeth. “Doc, I’m not sure I can accept this,” he says slowly. “I’ll be honest: I don’t even know how I’m going to pay for the treatment you’ve given me, and this seems like going above and beyond the call of-”

“Pay no mind to the price of your care,” Hannibal says. “We are well-funded for charitable healing. You are far from the first patient I’ve treated who did not have the means to pay.”

Will Graham’s eyes narrow, suspicious and speculative. Hannibal wonders how to put him at ease.

“You’re sure?” Will asks, and Hannibal nods.

“I am,” he replies, and he watches with a flush of warm satisfaction as Will Graham begins to eat. Will is self-conscious, at first, his movements slow and his chewing cautious, but after the first few bites he seems to forget himself, and soon he is devouring the food with a complete and utter lack of grace. Hannibal thinks of his dinner with Alana earlier, how delicately she had cut each bite, how primly she had chewed and swallowed, and he cannot help but compare it to the base ravenousness with which Will Graham is now consuming the same meal. He finds that it is surprisingly beguiling.

Will Graham does not stop eating until the food is gone, at which point he drains the Thermos of orange juice in one long swig. Hannibal watches the movement of Will Graham’s throat as he swallows and he feels an old, familiar heat at the base of his gut. Will sets the Thermos down and draws in a breath. Hannibal gives him a small, blank smile when their eyes meet.

“Was everything to your liking?” he asks, and Will shrugs.

“It was alright,” he says, and Hannibal’s spine stiffens, offended, until Will Graham asks a question. “You said your hospital’s well-funded,” he says. “Mind if I ask by who?”

“Not at all," Hannibal says. "It’s no secret that our hospital receives the majority of its funding from the Verger family.”

Will licks his lips. “The Verger family,” he repeats. “The same Verger family that hired the guy I’ve been accused of killing?”

Hannibal taps his finger against the surface of the table. “The very one,” he says.

“And this ‘Verger family,’ I take it they’re pretty well-connected around here?” Will asks, and Hannibal nods.

“They are,” he says. “They own Verger Groves, and thus most of the land in Redlands. Nearly every institution in this city is funded by the Verger family. Or, more specifically, by Mason Verger.” Hannibal wonders what it is that Will Graham is trying to glean from this line of questioning.

“And is this ‘Mason Verger’ the person Sheriff Crawford thinks I don’t want coming after me?” Will asks, and suddenly Hannibal understands. He resists the urge to smile. Will Graham is observant.

“I should think so,” he says, and Will Graham pushes the empty containers away from him so that he can lean forward, his forearms on the table and his hands folded.

“Do you agree?” he asks, and Hannibal purses his lips. He looks around the garden, feigning concern, before leaning closer to Will.

“I do agree,” he says lowly. “Between the two of us, Will, I believe that Mason Verger is a very dangerous man. In addition to holding the favor of the Redlands police force, he maintains a private militia of Italian mercenaries who operate well outside the bounds of the law. If I may speak frankly: Jack Crawford may need evidence against you before he can take you into custody, but Mason Verger’s men do not require evidence before they kill you.”

Will Graham frowns, and he bites his lips and looks down at his hands. He seems to draw himself inward, suddenly, projecting an air of vulnerability. Hannibal blinks. *He’s going to try to use me to his advantage*, he realizes, and he resists the urge to smile again.

He likes Will Graham, he decides. He likes Will Graham very much.

“You don’t think I did it, do you, Doc?” Will asks, his voice softer now, lower, and Hannibal licks his lips.

“I believe in due process, Will,” he says gravely. “Unless Jack Crawford finds evidence against you, I believe you to be an innocent man.”

This is a lie, but Will Graham doesn't need to know that. Will twists his fingers together and looks up at Hannibal through his lashes, blue eyes bright in the gray evening light.

“What should I do, Doc?” he asks, and Hannibal leans forward again, tips his head down.

“I think you should stay here,” he says, ensuring that his voice is steady and earnest. “It’s the safest place for you. Mason Verger won’t call his dogs on you as long as you play by the rules. It’s part of the… understanding he has with Jack Crawford. Wait until Sheriff Crawford admits he was wrong about you, and then you can leave Redlands. Until then, stay close and stay visible.”

Will lets out a long breath and presses his hands against the surface of the table. “Thanks, Doc,” he says. “I appreciate it. Most people wouldn’t go out of their way to help a guy like

me.” He lifts his eyes to Hannibal with a wry grin, and Hannibal smiles.

“You’ll find that I am not like most people,” he says, and Will lets out a quiet laugh.

“Yeah, well, me either,” he says, and he pauses for a moment. “Say, Doc, if I’m going to be staying here a while, maybe we could make this a regular thing? Dinner in the garden, I mean."

There is an affectation of nonchalance in Will Graham's tone that Hannibal recognizes well; it is one he has used himself more times than he can count. He keeps his face still and says nothing, forces Will Graham to keep going.

"It’s been a long time since I had the pleasure of sharing a meal with someone," Will continues after a moment. "I’d like to do it again, if that’s alright with you.”

Hannibal feels his lips twitch. Will Graham thinks that he is being subtle.

“I’ll have to discuss it with my wife,” he says.

It’s a lie. In truth, he will simply tell Alana that he has volunteered to take additional hours at the hospital, but Hannibal is curious to see how Will Graham will react to the mention of his spouse. The man in question runs a hand through his curly hair, looks abashed, and shrugs.

“Right,” he says, “of course. Sorry.”

“No apologies necessary, Will,” Hannibal says, and he rises to his feet. “Regardless, I think it best if we both retire for the evening. You need your rest, after all.” Will follows suit, rising to stand and extending a hand into the empty space between them like a lingering temptation.

“We were never properly introduced,” he says by way of explanation, and Hannibal feels his lips twitch as he takes Will’s hand in his. It feels warm and small, and strong. Hannibal finds that he is reluctant to let it go. “Nice to meet you, Doctor Lecter,” Will says, and Hannibal feel his lips curve upward.

“The pleasure is all mine, Will,” he says, and he means it.

The Ideal Husband

Chapter Notes

I've added the total chapter number for this fic. I may play around with a length a little bit towards the end, but in the meantime I wanted to give you all an idea of where we are in the story. My other fics have been pretty short, but rest assured that we are still in the introductory phase of this story. (It's going a bit of a behemoth.) I am four chapters ahead of what's posted, and I have to tell you that I am SO excited to share some of the later developments with you. Just have to get there first! :)

As always, thanks so much for all of the comments and kudos! They make my day, and are such a huge encouragement as I work through the story.

Happy reading :).

W.

Will gives up on sleep around five am. He pulls a chair up to the window on the far side of his room, and when he looks out he can see the rose garden. He watches the day begin to take shape around him, watches the dawn spread itself like fingers through branches and blooms. He supposes the doves must be asleep somewhere, huddled together against the morning chill, but he can’t see them.

A nurse brings him breakfast hours later: scrambled eggs, fresh fruit, and coffee, which he devours like a starving man at the small table in his room. Despite the meal he’d shared with Doctor Lecter less than twelve hours before, he is ravenous. He feels like there is a bottomless pit where his stomach used to be. He feels like he could eat for days and still be hungry.

He has only just finished his meal when he hears a knock on the door, and he looks up to see a white-uniformed nurse standing in the hallway.

“You have visitors!” she tells him, and the news is so unexpected that Will stiffens in his chair. He doesn’t protest when she glides into the room and removes his tray of food, but his pulse thuds in his throat when she turns to leave.

Who could it be?

Mason Verger and his cronies?

Jack Crawford?

That sheriff from Virginia?

In truth, there are so many people who want to see Will dead or behind bars that he's long since given up trying to keep track of them all. He can hardly account for which one of them may have chosen to make an appearance in his hospital room on this sunny morning in Redlands, California. All he can do is tense his fingers against his thighs in preparation for their arrival, can only coil his limbs in preparation to strike. He can only wait to see what will happen.

As it turns out, the visitors are none that Will can recognize. They are a woman and a young boy: migrants by the look of them, with the the sort of ragged fastidiousness that clings to those who seem hellbent on making an honest go of it "God willing and the creek don't rise". Their clothes are faded but clean, and their faces, though lean from hunger, are kind and open.

Will thinks the woman must be around his age, and he watches as she glances his way before flushing pink and averting her gaze. She leads the boy forward with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Good morning," Will says, keeping his voice warm. The woman nudges the boy's shoulder.

"Go on, Wally," she whispers, and the boy clears his throat.

"Um, my name's Wally," he says. "My mom and I found you when you were sleeping by the road. I… I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Nice to meet you, Wally," Will says, extending his hand. "My name's Will Graham. I'm happy to tell you I'm just fine."

Wally steps forward, extends a skinny arm and long-fingered hand, and Will can't help but think of Abigail, of her shaking wrists and nervous fingers.

How different this boy is from Abigail, Will thinks, and his heart aches again for the solitary girl in the garden. He wonders where her parents are, or if she even has them anymore.

"I'm Molly Foster," the woman says, stepping forward and extending her hand as well. Her palm is cool and calloused, her grip strong. "I'm Wally's mom. Wally's been talking about you nonstop since we brought you in yesterday. We can't tell you how glad we are that you're okay."

Wally nods as his mother speaks, toys with the hem of his faded red shirt until she pats him on the back.

"Hey Wally," she says, "it looks like there's a window over there, do you mind going over there a minute while I talk to Mister Graham about grown-up stuff?"

"Okay, Mom," he says, and he makes his way to the window obediently while his mother slides into the chair across from Will. She folds her hands on the table and clears her throat,

darts her eyes around the room. She seems to have a hard time looking at Will.

“Look, Mister Graham-” she begins.

“Will.”

“*Will*,” she says, and she casts a small smile down at the surface of the table. “I’m sorry if we overstepped bringing you here. I have no idea what your story is, and frankly it’s none of my business. I just… we were worried about you.” She pauses here, traces her pointer finger over the chipped linoleum. “We stopped to give you some water, and when you wouldn’t wake up, Wally, he…” She presses her lips together, draws in a long breath through her nose. “We’ve just seen too many people in similar straits end up dead,” she says in a rush. “These are hard times, and Lord knows I’m no person to judge, but I’ve seen enough people die from lack of food or dehydration to last a lifetime. We couldn’t just leave you there, so we put you in the back of my truck and brought you here. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Will leans back in his chair, folds his arms over his chest and studies the woman seated across from him. She has wide cheekbones, thick hair pulled tight at the back of her head, a soft mouth. She won’t make eye contact with Will, keeps her eyes focused on her hands, and her face is still flushed. She looks tired. When Will doesn’t say anything, she presses on.

“If money’s an issue,” she says, “let me know, and Wally and I will see what we can do to help you out. We don’t have much, but anything we can give we wi-”

“Do you make a habit of apologizing to people for helping them?” Will asks, genuinely curious, and a nervous laugh bursts from her chest when she finally looks up.

“Um, no?” she says, and then she straightens in her chair, pulls her hands into her lap and looks down at them. “I mean, maybe? Who knows. I barely have enough time to keep us fed these days, let alone spend time in deep reflection on my actions.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Will tells her. “I’m grateful for what you did for me.”

This is a lie, but she doesn’t need to know that. In truth, if she and her well-intentioned son had simply left Will be, he could be halfway to Mexico by now, his ill-fated sojourn in Redlands little more than a memory. Instead, he’s more or less imprisoned in this town by fear of death at the hands of Italian mercenaries, all because of this family’s compulsion to do the right thing.

Unfortunately for Will, the strings of fate often weave a tangled web of hidden knots.

“I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear that,” Molly says. “I kept thinking - what if that were me? I can’t afford a hospital bill, what if I woke up and found out some person had dropped me off when I didn’t even know it? But then again, what if I were really sick, and might have died otherwise? I kept going around in circles.”

“You did the right thing,” Will tells her, with all the ease and certainty of someone who is well-accustomed to lying. “Really, you did. And once I get the okay to leave, I’ll figure out a way make it up to you.”

Molly's face twists, then, and her lips twitch when she risks another glance at Will's face. "Make it up to me?" she asks. "What do you mean?"

Will shrugs. "I know a thing or two about motors," he tells her. "If you want me to take a look at your truck, make sure everything is running the way it should, I could do that. Or I could figure out a way to make some money so you and Wally don't have to worry about food for a while. Or-"

"No, that's - that's not what I meant," Molly says, and she turns her eyes back down to the table. "I mean - if you want to do that, that would be great, but don't - it's not a requirement. That's not why I did it." She stops, clears her throat again. "Kindness doesn't have an ulterior motive," she tells him, and Will raises his hands with a self-effacing grin.

"Fair enough," he says, and he finally meets her gaze across the table. Her cheeks flush pink, her eyes fall to Will's lips for a brief moment before darting away again, and Will resists the urge to smirk.

He thinks that Molly is sweet, but delusional. Most kindness comes with an ulterior motive.

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H.

The sharp tang of citrus and the heady weight of olive oil dance across Hannibal's tongue as he chews. Across the table from him, Alana eats her cake in small, measured bites, leaving a large portion of it untouched when she sets her fork and knife down with a quiet *clink* against the china.

"Hannibal," she says, and he braces himself for the unpleasantness of the coming conversation. "I was thinking… isn't it time for us to have children?"

Hannibal continues chewing, takes a rinsing drink of water before he answers. "We've discussed this before, Alana," he says, and his wife frowns.

"Yes, we have, but that was years ago," she says. "You're well-established here now. The old concerns no longer apply."

"Perhaps," Hannibal admits. "But they've been replaced by new concerns."

Alana presses her lips together. "What concerns?" she asks, and Hannibal sets his silverware down in deference to the coming argument.

"Concerns over bringing another life into such a dark and dangerous world," he tells her. "Concerns that the needs of my work would prevent me from giving our children the care and

attention they deserve."

"Hannibal, the world isn't all bad, no matter what you say," Alana tells him, her eyes flashing. "And if you're worried about your job, why not reduce your hours at the hospital? Or move to a private practice?" Hannibal swallows, suppresses the thrill of irritation coiling in his gut.

They are re-treading familiar (and detested) grounds with this conversation. Hannibal married Alana many years ago, when he was new to Redlands and fleeing what had nearly been a catastrophic mistake in Florence. When Hannibal met the woman who would become his wife, he was seeking above all else to create a life above suspicion in America, and marrying Alana Bloom was the perfect way to accomplish this chosen goal. She was beautiful, kind-hearted, and beloved by her community, and Hannibal was a quickly rising star within her social circle. Their courtship and ensuing marriage were widely celebrated, their public persona above reproach. Even now, Alana remains a vital and steadfast thread in the fabric of Hannibal's perceived normalcy. However, she is also obstinate, and she does not understand the truth of her role in Hannibal's life. Thus, their marriage is fraught with disagreements.

"We have discussed this as well, Alana," Hannibal says. "My work is very important to me. I will not consider sacrificing it under any circumstances."

"Even if the circumstances are our children?" she asks, and Hannibal tilts his head.

"I would think your work at the orphanage would bring you enough fulfillment," he says, his tone slightly reproachful. "You have the opportunity there to make a positive impact on the lives of many more children than our marriage could produce."

A line forms between Alana's eyebrows. She is becoming angry. "It's not the same," she says, and Hannibal blinks.

"Why not?" he asks, and Alana presses her lips together again. Hannibal notes that her face is beginning to grow red; everything is proceeding as expected, then.

"Why are you so against this?" she asks.

"Is our marriage no longer enough for you?" he counters, and she scowls.

"Don't do that, Hannibal," she says, her voice sharp. "Don't turn this around on me."

Hannibal lifts his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I'm merely trying to understand where this is coming from," he says.

This is a lie, but she doesn't need to know that. She doesn't need to know that Hannibal is content with his facade of a family as it exists with her now: that he doesn't want a child forcing it to become the real thing. In truth, there are few things in the world which Hannibal finds more distasteful than the thought of having children. The thought of being so beholden to anyone, to a child or even to Alana as their mother, is unspeakably odious to him.

He has no intention of changing his outlook.

Silence settles between them for several moments, brittle and razor-sharp, until at last Hannibal speaks again.

“Abigail Hobbs is recovering nicely,” he says, guiding the conversation into safer waters. “I’ve seen to it that the cooks do not serve her any meat. She seems to be regaining strength every day.”

Alana holds his gaze, her eyes searching, until at last she relents. “I’m happy to hear it,” she says. “Abigail is a sweet girl.”

Hannibal licks his lips, assigns a moment to decision. He has learned, over the years, that there is always one sure-fire method of guiding his wife away from these arguments and the subjects discussed therein.

“I have to return to the hospital in a few hours,” he tells her, letting his gaze move over her body. “If you’d like, perhaps we could-”

She raises an eyebrow. “Hannibal,” she says, her voice flat. She is still angry. “You know that’s not a substitute for resolving our disagreement.”

Hannibal shrugs, pushes his chair away from the table. “It was merely a suggestion,” he says, and he moves to depart, but she stops him with a hand on his arm.

“No,” she says, her voice softer now, lower. “Let’s.”

For all that his wife claims lovemaking is not an appropriate stand-in for meaningful conversation, Hannibal has found it to be the ideal way to fill the silences between them. The gap in their understanding of each other, the sometimes insurmountable void of their differences, always seems to be smoothed over by the act of physical intimacy between them. When Hannibal moves against her body he feels as though he is weaving back together the jagged edges that have formed between them, mending the rent seams stitch by stitch, and he goes through the motions of pleasure and release as if watching himself through a window. He makes love to her the way he knows she likes it, gentle and slow, and if her eyes are reproachful when he slips the condom on, her disapproval vanishes when he slides between her legs. He leaves her half an hour later, her hair tousled and her mouth panting from orgasm, and his limbs tingle from his own release when he rises from the bed. He kisses her forehead and cups her cheek before he goes, and she meets his eyes and smiles. It seems that, for now, all is forgiven between them.

He rinses himself off before dressing, and his next stop is the kitchen, where he retrieves a bag of food from the refrigerator and takes a long draft of water. Then he enters the foyer, and then the front door. His conversation with Alana has already been moved to the back of his mind, tucked away in a sealed box and labeled with "A Matter of Little Concern." His thoughts are moving forward to what is to come.

He will have dinner with Will Graham, tonight.

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W.

Will is very good at cat's cradle. He sits for long stretches with his wrist through the string, sometimes talking with Abigail and sometimes in companionable silence, but he can always tell when she plans to tighten the web. He did not lie when he told her that he knows well how to avoid a trap.

For her part, Abigail still seems delighted by his talent, and she asks Will if he would like to play again and again until at last her nurse comes out to the garden and calls her away for her dinner. Will walks her to the door this time, parts ways with her in the hallway and returns to his own room to freshen up. He runs cool water over his face and neck, lathers soap over his arms and shoulders and rinses away the sweat that accumulated there during the stifling afternoon. Then he puts on a clean shirt and returns to the garden, and he waits for the Good Doctor to arrive. While he waits, he reviews what he knows about Hannibal Lecter.

All told, it isn't much. First, that he's a doctor, and he seems to be in charge of this sizable hospital. Second, that he's married, and he has a "charming wife." Third, that he's unusually attractive. But those are all surface-level observations, Will thinks, and won't do him much good in the weeks to come. He digs deeper.

The Good Doctor stood in Will's defense against Sheriff Crawford. The Good Doctor worked to secure Will's privacy. The Good Doctor offered Will advice for how best to survive his current predicament. And, most importantly of all, the Good Doctor is a man that Sheriff Crawford trusts.

According to Doctor Lecter, Jack Crawford's opinion is the bulwark between Will and his freedom.

So, Will needs to get to the Good Doctor to get to Jack Crawford to get to Mason Verger. That seems clear enough.

What is less clear, however, is the question of how best to influence Hannibal Lecter. Should Will try for fear and vulnerability in the face of unrequited danger? Inspire that part of the Good Doctor which seems compelled to maintain his code of ethics even when faced with pressure from law enforcement and his peers? Or should he take a different approach (more dangerous, yes, but undeniably more effective) and make the Good Doctor fall in love with him?

The risk, of course, is that his plan would backfire, and his attempts to seduce Doctor Lecter would instead drive him away. But if he could do it successfully, he thinks, his task in Redlands would be immeasurably easier. Doctor Lecter would be far more compelled to champion for the safety and freedom of his lover than he would for a mere patient.

This approach raises many questions, of course. First and foremost: is the Good Doctor attracted to men? And, even if he is, would he be willing to act on his attraction?

Unfortunately, it is simply too soon to tell, so Will decides the safest course of action for now is simply to test the waters. He'll play it slow and careful, he thinks, try to figure out what Doctor Lecter wants in a friend before he considers what he wants in a lover.

Will knows how to play the long game. He's good at it. He always has been. He's always had to be.

The shadows of the rose bushes have lengthened by the time the Doctor Lecter joins Will in the garden, and the doves flutter away in a flurry of dust and whistling wings at his approach. He's changed out of his hospital coat, replaced it with a crisp, white polo shirt and the loose-fitting, high-waisted pants that are all the rage among people who can afford to care about what they're wearing. Will can't help but notice that the shirt is short-sleeved and well-fitted, revealing lean, well-muscled arms and defined pectorals. The pants, though loose, accentuate a long torso, slightly padded but strong, and it doesn't take a great deal of insight to imagine what lies underneath it.

Will emits a cartoon-like dog-whistle in his mind.

The Good Doctor really is a looker, he thinks, but the smile he gives the approaching man is all innocence.

"Evening, Doctor Lecter," he says, and he rises to stand.

"Good evening, Will," the Good Doctor replies, and he takes Will's hand with a polite smile. "Have you had a pleasant day?" he asks, and Will watches him set a paper bag down on the table.

"My day's been just fine, Doc, thanks for asking," Will says, and he slides back into his seat. He's ravenous, but he refuses to be impatient. It wouldn't do to seem ungrateful.

"I'm glad to hear it," Doctor Lecter says, and he begins to unpack the contents of the bag.

"What's for dinner?" Will asks, and the Good Doctor smiles.

"Beef *au jus* with a light salad of fresh cucumber and tomatoes from my garden, followed by a slice of orange olive oil cake for dessert," he replies, and he removes the lids from the containers spread out on the table.

"Beef *au jus*?" Will asks, unreservedly curious, and the Good Doctor nods.

"A sandwich," he says, "consisting of thinly sliced roast beef on top of French bread, served with a side of beef broth for dipping."

Will lets out an appreciative hum. "That sounds delicious."

Doctor Lecter gives him another small smile. "It is," he says, and he gestures to the food. "I hope that you'll enjoy it."

Will doesn't consume his sandwich so much as inhale it, forgetting his table manners entirely after the second bite and licking the excess broth from his fingers and wrists as he eats. He tries to take his time with the salad, reminds himself that it's been months since he's eaten anything this fresh, but the sugar-sweet burst of the tomatoes seems to make his brain short circuit. Thankfully the Good Doctor doesn't seem to mind Will's atrocious table manners, and instead watches him eat with a smooth, placid expression and an easy smile. He's hardly touched his own food.

"I take it you enjoyed your meal?" he asks, and Will nods.

"I've never had anything like it," he says.

"I'd assumed as much," the doctor tells him, and Will raises an eyebrow.

"Oh?" he asks. "And why's that?"

"This dish was recently developed in Los Angeles, and its popularity has not yet moved beyond the state. I assumed based on your accent that you are not a native Californian."

Will grins. "An astute observation, Doctor Lecter," he says, and the Good Doctor tips his head.

"Thank you. I assume it is also a correct one?"

Will laughs. "Indeed it is. And if you don't mind me saying so, judging from your accent *you're* not a native Californian either."

The Good Doctor's lips twitch upward, and Will sees small lines form at the edges of his eyes. "I am not."

Will reaches for a container holding a slice of cake. "Mind if I start on dessert?" he asks, and the Good Doctor shakes his head.

"By all means," he says, and Will watches him take a precise bite of his own sandwich. Not a drop of broth anywhere. No crumbs. It's a spectacle.

"So then, neither of us are from California," Will says, reminding himself to focus on the task at hand. "Mind telling me where you *are* from, Doctor Lecter? I'd guess it's nowhere here in the States." The Doctor finishes chewing before he speaks. Will wonders if he ought to consider doing the same.

"I grew up in a European country called Lithuania."

"Did you live there during the War?"

"No. I was in Paris for medical school. I was there when the fighting started, and I stayed through the entirety of the war. I treated many soldiers, in those years."

Will feels his eyes widen, the first genuine reaction to the Good Doctor he's allowed himself. "What was it like?" he asks, and the doctor hums thoughtfully.

“Some days, life felt nearly normal,” he says. “Other days it felt like living in Dante’s *Inferno*, suspended above the gaping maw of hell.”

Will doesn’t begrudge the Good Doctor his hyperbole. He’s seen the pictures from the War. He knows the doctor is telling the truth.

“So what’d you do when the War ended?”

“I moved around Europe for many years, working in various hospitals across the continent.”

“So then what brought you to America?” Will asks. He finds that he is genuinely curious.

“The chance to settle down,” the Good Doctor tells him. “I couldn’t do so in Europe. Everywhere I went, the shadows of the War seemed to follow me.”

Will leans forward in his seat. “Do you ever miss it, though? Europe, I mean?”

The doctor studies him from across the table. “Where are you from, Will?” he asks, and Will leans back in his seat again.

“Ah, nowhere, really,” he says. “My past isn’t quite as... *storied* as yours.”

The doctor’s mouth ticks upward again. “I doubt that.”

Will finds that his lips are moving without his permission. “Unless you consider sleeping under benches and trying to figure out where my next meal is going to come from as ‘storied’,” he says, “then, no, I’m pretty sure there isn’t much to tell.”

“Do you have a family, Will?”

“No.”

“Do you want one?”

Will stiffens in his chair, muzzles the immediate and chiming chorus in his mind shouting *Yes, yes, I want it, it’s all I’ve ever wanted.* He clears his throat.

“You have a family, don’t you, Doctor Lecter?” he asks. “How long have you been married?”

“Six years,” the doctor tells him. “Have you ever been married, Will?”

Will swallows. “No.”

“Ever considered it?”

“I don’t think *it* ever considered *me*,” Will blurts, and he wonders suddenly where he lost control of this conversation.

“I can’t imagine why,” the Good Doctor says, all ease and self-collection in the face of Will’s discomfort. “You seem to me to be the ideal husband.”

Will feels a startled laugh burst out of his chest. “Oh?” he says for lack of a better response. “And why’s that?”

The doctor’s face is utterly smooth. “You seem uniquely suited to survival in these uncertain times,” he tells him. His voice is even and low, and Will feels a tingle at the base of his spine. “The mongoose I’d want under the house when the snakes slither by.”

Will has a vision, suddenly, of the guard in the orange grove, his body sprawled out and tangled on the packed earth at Will’s feet. He swallows around the lump in his throat.

“Thanks,” he finally says, for lack of anything else to say.

“You’re welcome,” the doctor tells him, and he gestures to Will’s half-eaten dessert. “Now finish your cake,” he chides, and Will does so, although the taste has turned to ash in his mouth.

The Good Doctor is slippery, he thinks with a dawning sense of unease.

He needs to do better next time.

Old Habits

Chapter Summary

Thanks so much to everyone who commented and kudosed on the last chapter!! It's so great to hear from you :)!

This chapter has one of the developments I've been excited about: the introduction of one of my favorite characters into the story. I hope you all enjoy!

H.

Mason Verger is throwing a party, and it goes without saying that Hannibal and Alana have to be there. Never mind the fact that there are innumerable other things that Hannibal would rather be doing than sipping champagne and trading idle small talk with uninteresting people in the middle of Mason Verger's gaudy ballroom: it's *expected* that he be there, and expectations form the framework of Hannibal's life. They are the foundation upon which he's built the person suit that's sheltered him for nearly seven years.

And so here he is, amidst the cacophony of tastelessness that is the Verger manor, eating canapes that are invariably over-salted and undercooked and wishing he were anywhere else. He watches a uniformed man hoist a tray of finger sandwiches over his shoulder, and he takes a moment to wonder how quickly Will Graham would annihilate the entirety of that paltry offering. He tries to imagine what would happen if Will Graham were to enter this party at all, and he feels his lips curve upward at the thought.

If anything, Hannibal thinks, Will Graham would cause this ballroom to incinerate immediately upon contact. If anything, Will Graham would cause all of the hot air and the egos to burst into flames the moment they encountered him. There would be nothing left of this party at all, Hannibal thinks, just Will Graham, surrounded by empty space. Empty space that could be filled with other things. Better things.

Destruction and rebirth, Hannibal thinks. *What a captivating thought.*

Hannibal thinks about Will Graham, about flames and destruction and rebirth, and he watches with mild interest as Frederick Chilton asks his wife to dance. Alana looks especially beautiful tonight, Hannibal knows, but he also knows that this is not why Frederick Chilton has made her the object of his attentions. Frederick Chilton has no interest in Alana as a human being, but only as the most coveted woman in their social circle. He doesn't want an

affair with Alana, he wants the prestige that an affair with Alana would bring. He is a vain, trifling, tedious man who is wholly preoccupied with notoriety. Hannibal wouldn't be bothered in the slightest if his wife chose to have an affair; however, he knows that if she did, it would never be with Frederick Chilton. Alana is far too discerning for that.

Hannibal himself has been propositioned more times than he can count since he joined himself in holy matrimony, but he has never felt compelled to take any of these would-be lovers up on their offer. He is content with his life with Alana; or, he supposes, he is some approximation of content. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he has been comfortable enough with his life with Alana, and that the possibilities for liaisons have been so uniformly uninspiring, that he has maintained a homeostasis verging dangerously on the brink of complacency.

He wonders with no small amount of distress if it is even possible for him to be tempted anymore, or if he has lost all trace of that fire which once threatened to consume him whole. But then he thinks of Will Graham, of the sweet-sharp tang of his sweat in the garden on a particularly hot evening, of the sight of his pulse fluttering beneath the skin of his white throat, and the memories stir something deep in his gut.

Yes, Hannibal thinks. He can still be tempted.

He would have been content to remain where he is all evening, trading mindless small talk and ruminating over thoughts of Will Graham, but he is pulled back to himself unpleasantly when he realizes that Mason Verger is approaching. He lets his face spread in a welcoming smile, but his spine stiffens as the man draws near.

"*Well*, if it isn't *Doctor Lecter,*" Mason crows, his squinting eyes gleaming, "head of my favorite hospital and all-around great guy. How are ya, Doc? Say, mind if you walk with me for a moment?"

"Certainly not, Mason," Hannibal says, and he manages to calm the waves of contempt and disgust that threaten to erupt from his voice.

"*Wonderful*, Doctor Lecter, that's just *wonderful*," Mason says, and he draws Hannibal away from the crowd, through enormous glass doors and out into the night air. Hannibal takes a moment to stare in unfettered disgust at a marble fountain spitting water in three descending tiers in the middle of the landing. At the top of the fountain is what Hannibal imagines must be some approximation of Poseidon, surrounded on all sides by dolphins and narwhals. As with everything on the Verger estate, it is unspeakably ugly.

"How can I help you, Mason?" Hannibal asks, and Mason leans back against the curved marble railing with a wave of his short fingers.

"Well, Doc, I've had some pretty *interesting* conversations with Jack Crawford lately," he says, and Hannibal braces himself. "Now, *he* told *me* that you've got the guy who *murdered* one of my guards tucked away happy as a clam at your hospital. But when I heard that I said '*No*, Jack, there's no *way* Doctor Lecter would do *that*. *He'd* never stand in the way of the *law*.' Would you, Doctor Lecter?" Mason stares at him, his face flushed and porcine, and

Hannibal flexes his fingers at his sides. He becomes aware of a sound emanating from somewhere in the space behind his right ear, almost like a bell ringing.

“The man Jack accused of the act is a patient of mine, yes,” he says, “but it seems Jack failed to mention there is no evidence against him.”

Mason’s nose wrinkles. “*Evidence*?” he caws. “Since when does *anyone* in *this* country care about *evidence*?”

“Jack Crawford does,” Hannibal says, “which is why he left the patient in my care for the time being. I’ve made it to clear to him that I would release the patient into custody immediately if evidence were to be found. I’ll say the same thing to you now.”

“Do *you* think he did it, Doc?” Mason asks. Hannibal wonders, briefly, at how Mason’s mind works: the erratic firing of synapses that constitutes his train of thought.

“I am not familiar with the details of the crime,” he says evenly.

“D’ya wanna *know* all the *dirty details*, Doctor Lecter?” Mason asks, his face twisted in a leer. “I wouldn’t want to make you *uncomfortable*, but I’d really like to know: do you think your *patient* is capable of breaking a man’s neck with his bare hands?”

Hannibal has wondered, up to this point, exactly how the guard had been killed, and he feels a thrill up his spine at the description. For a moment he allows himself the pleasure of imagining Will Graham with his pale hands gripped tight around a man’s head, the hidden power in his limbs pulled taut to snap his victim’s neck.

“I hardly know, Mason,” he says as the mesmerizing images fade. “The man is little more than a stranger to me.”

Mason squints at him, his mouth twisted, until he lets out a triumphant sound. “You know what, Doctor Lecter,” he cries, slapping his palm against the marble railing, “I think I’ll play this your way. I think that sounds like *fun*,” he says, and he slides suddenly very close to Hannibal, so close that their chests are nearly touching. “I’ll leave Will Graham alone, for now, and let Jack Crawford do his police work and let you do your work trying to protect the allegedly innocent.” Hannibal gazes down at him.

“I’m pleased to hear you’ve decided to allow the law to function as it should,” he says, and Mason gives him a twisted grin.

“Of *course* you are,” he says. “Cause we all *know* the *peerless Doctor Lecter* can’t *bear* the thought of anything *illegal* or *immoral* happening. *Your* moral compass is screwed on tight as a nun’s panties, isn’t it, Doctor Lecter?” he asks, and he slaps his palm against the middle of Hannibal’s chest with a laugh.

In his previous life, Hannibal would have tolerated this behavior quietly and placidly, and then he would have driven back out to the Verger Estate in the middle of the night and strung Mason Verger up by the skin of his back. He would have shattered his fingers, pan-seared his

flesh like veal, and let snails feed off his carcass. But it has been many long, long years since Hannibal allowed himself such indulgences, and so he merely forces a smile.

“No man is completely without fault,” he says, and Mason barks out another laugh.

“Whatever you say, Doctor Lecter,” he crows, and then he ambles away, still laughing to himself. Hannibal watches him go, and he is readying himself to go back inside when a slim figure emerges from the other side of the fountain.

“Hi, Doctor Lecter,” the figure says, and Hannibal bows his head in greeting.

“Hello, Margot,” he calls, and he watches her cast a slow look around.

Margot Verger favors the contemporary aesthetic of feminine beauty: her eyebrows plucked to nothingness and redrawn in thin, arcing lines, her lips and eyes dark, and her face painted pale, and as a result she often looks like she just wandered off the set of a Hollywood film. However, her makeup is even more garish than usual tonight, and Hannibal wonders if Mason has been hitting her again. It wouldn’t be the first time she’s used makeup to hide it.

“How’s Abigail?” Margot asks, offering him a cigarette, and Hannibal leans down so that she can light it.

“Abigail is doing well,” he says. “She’s regaining her strength. She’s been eating at least two meals a day.”

Margot takes a long draw of her cigarette. “Good,” she says, and although it’s stated in her characteristic rolling monotone, Hannibal knows that she means it. Her eyes lope around again, as if waiting for the specter of her brother to leap out of the shadows. “Do you think you could look after her there a little while longer?” she asks, and she slides her gaze to meet Hannibal’s. “We’ll see to it that you’re properly reimbursed, of course.”

Hannibal watches her draw the cigarette to her mouth, sees the slight tremble in her wrist. Yes, he thinks, Mason has been hitting her again.

“Of course,” he tells her. “Abigail may stay as long as necessary.”

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W.

Will doesn’t have much to do at the hospital when he’s not having dinner with Doctor Lecter. He’s used to a life of constant movement, of never staying in one place for any long period of time. He’s used to scrounging for food and money, to working his hands raw on engines and fishing line and hard-packed earth until his nails are worn to nothingness and the pads of his

fingers are bleeding. He's used to hunger and lack of sleep, to the constant whispering urge to *Keep moving, keep moving*. He's not accustomed to long days spent in idleness. He hardly knows what do with himself.

Most days he finds himself in the rose garden for lack of anything else to do, keeping Abigail company as she practices cat's cradle or occasionally draws clumsy renderings of the rose bushes sprawling triumphant in the sunlight across from them. Eventually he grows to enjoy his afternoons spent there. Once the worst of his anxiety wears off he's even able to find a certain amount of peace there, which is frankly a novel experience for him. The heavy scent of the blooms, the quiet cooing of the doves, the occasional murmurs of sound drifting out through the hospital's open windows: the garden seems to wrap around him like a blanket, telling him to rest, and for the first time in his life he does so voluntarily. He eats and sleeps more in those first days at the hospital than he thinks he has in years.

Will *likes* the rose garden. He really does. But after spending several days there, alternating between sleeping the hours away and watching Abigail with her tattered string and her drawings, he can't help but think that the girl could do with some exercise, and a little change of scenery. It's one thing for *him* to laze his days away: he's old, and worn-out as a dirty dish rag. It's another thing for *her* to do it. She's young, and far too thin for a growing girl. She looks like a ghost, wan and drawn from lack of nourishment and activity. It doesn't sit well with him, the sight of her alone and motionless like a smudge of dull color against the white adobe wall.

She looks so small, like something that could be wiped from the earth as easily as brushing a speck of dust off a window. Will thinks of the scar on her neck, of how close she's already come to just such a fate, and he can't bear the thought of it. He wants her to get better. He wants her to be a kid again. So one morning he decides to sacrifice his packed agenda of sleeping and eating all day and he asks Abigail's nurse if he can take her for a walk. He figures it's worth a shot.

The nurse gives him a dour look at his question, and she tells him that she'll have to check with Doctor Lecter. Will resists the urge to laugh at her blatant distrust. It's just so *typical*. He's learned the hard way that most people have a tendency to distrust migrants, but Will especially seems to attract dislike. He isn't sure what it is about him that people seem to find so distasteful, but he's long since made peace with it. He doesn't much care for other people, either. He doesn't mind their disdain. He doesn't mind being alone.

(This is a lie, but not one he lets himself think about.)

"Of course," Will tells the nurse, "see what Doctor Lecter thinks."

Unsurprisingly, she's back five minutes later with a scowl and her reluctant permission, and Will tries to put the unpleasant exchange behind him. He finds Abigail in her usual spot by the wall in the garden. She looks up when he approaches, and she gives him a small smile and a wave.

"Hi, Mister Will," she says, and he grins at her.

“Hey Abigail,” he says, and he drops down next to her gracelessly. The doves ruffle their wings, discontented with his coltishness, but they do not fly away. “How are you feeling this morning? Did you eat your breakfast?”

Abigail looks down at her cat’s cradle. “Yes,” she says.

“*All* of it?” he presses, and her mouth ticks up in a small smile.

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Good job, Abigail,” he says. “Keep doing that. You need to keep your strength up, especially today.”

Abigail blinks at him, curious, but cautious. “Why?” she asks, and Will rises to his feet.

“Because you and *I* have big plans today,” he says, and Abigail’s fingers still in their movement.

“Plans?” she asks, and Will nods.

“You got it, Abigail. Starting now.”

Abigail blinks, and her face spreads in a shy smile.

“What plans?”

“*We* are going to take a walk to the stream,” Will says. “Doctor Lecter told me there’s one not too far from here. I thought it might be fun to dip our feet in. Feels like it’s going to be a hot day today, don’t you think?”

Abigail looks down at her hands, purses her lips.

Will doesn’t know exactly what happened to Abigail, but he knows that whatever it was made her timid and skittish, wary of change and new things. This is a lot for her to handle, he knows. He doesn’t mind giving her the time she needs to think it over.

“So what do you say, Abigail?” he asks gently. “Do you want to do it?”

After several moments, she nods. “Okay,” she says. “Okay, yes, let’s do it.”

The sun is already hot overhead when they make their way down the gravel path leading away from the hospital. Abigail’s skin is very pale, nearly translucent, so while they’re walking Will gently asks her to roll her sleeves down and straighten her hat. Abigail does so, and Will can’t resist the urge to smile as she pulls the adult-sized baseball cap down over her small ears. He’s grown fond of Abigail during their shared afternoons in the rose garden. He, too, was different from other children when he was her age; often painfully so. He knows

what it's like to be young and feel like you're all alone in the world. He wouldn't wish that on anyone, let alone a sweetheart of a girl like Abigail.

"I wonder if there are fish in this stream," Abigail says as they walk, and Will hums. Abigail doesn't initiate conversation often, and he likes to encourage her when she does.

"Do you like to fish, Abigail?" he asks.

"I don't know how."

"Maybe I could teach you someday," Will says. "I'm a very good fisherman."

"Really?" Abigail asks, and Will grins.

"Yes, *really*," he says, and Abigail lets out a small, quiet giggle. "Why'd you say it like that, Abigail?"

"It's just, my dad was a fisherman, too, and you're nothing like him. I guess he was more of a hunter, though."

Will presses his lips together, tries to figure out the most neutral thing to say. Abigail doesn't mention her parents, much. Will has no idea where they are, or if they're even still alive.

"Oh, yeah?" he finally settles on, careful to keep his voice even and light, and Abigail nods.

"Yeah, he was a good hunter. Or at least he said he was."

They've reached the stream - or, what the Good Doctor *called* a stream, anyway. It's really more of a sad trickle than a body of water, but out in the scorching sunlight of a California mid-morning Will supposes it looks like an oasis. They can get their feet wet, at least.

"Do you want to dip your feet in the water, Abigail?" Will asks, and Abigail pauses, her fingers fluttering.

"Um," she says. "Um." Then, after another moment: "Okay."

"Then I will too," Will says, and he sits down in the dirt by the water to remove his socks and shoes. Abigail sits down beside him and mimics his movements, and when Will rolls up the cuffs of his blue jeans she does the same. Will smiles fondly. It was good to get her out of the rose garden.

"What's your favorite kind of fish?" Abigail asks.

"Trout," Will answers immediately. "Some of my happiest memories were made standing in the middle of a trout stream. Those are *real* streams, Abigail, not like this muddy excuse for a stream we have here."

Abigail gives him a small smile. "Do you ever use traps to fish?" she asks, and Will taps his fingers against his legs as he slides his feet into the water.

“Traps?” he repeats. “No, I - nothing fancy like that. Just a standard fishing pole and lures. Sometimes nets, when I work on big fishing boats.”

Abigail is sticking her feet in the water very gingerly, toes first.

“My dad liked to use traps,” she says.

“I see,” Will says slowly, and he watches Abigail finally submerge her feet.

“Yeah,” she says after a moment. “My dad always said the best traps were the ones people didn’t even notice until they were in them.”

“Huh,” Will says, and he forces a smile when Abigail beams at him.

“This is fun,” she says. “Thanks for bringing me here, Mister Graham.”

“You’re welcome, Abigail,” Will tells her, scarcely aware that he is speaking the words.

She said people, he thinks. *Not animals. People.*

+++

H.

It seems that Will Graham learns quickly. He’s become more guarded since their delightful conversation over beef *au jus* and orange olive oil cake, more wary of Hannibal’s seemingly idle interrogations. Will Graham is testing him, Hannibal knows, trying to figure out what he wants in a friend and confidant. Will Graham is adapting, learning to watch for Hannibal’s subtle threads of probing inquisition. He is harder to shake, now, but Hannibal is not concerned. After all, he’s nothing if not persistent. He will get under Will Graham’s skin, again. He’s sure of it.

Their dinner this evening is lamb, served with a mint sauce and fresh baby peas. The peas are quite a luxury, nearly as expensive as the lamb, but Will Graham seems patently oblivious to this fact as he devours them. His meal disappears in three ravenous bites. Hannibal makes a note to himself to increase Will’s serving size, again.

“So, Will,” he says, pausing for a moment to prepare a forkful of his own dinner, “did you enjoy your walk with Abigail today?”

Will licks his lips and guzzles from his canister of water. Hannibal watches his throat move as he swallows.

“I did, thanks for asking,” Will says. “And thanks for giving me your blessing. I think if that nurse had her druthers, I’d never see Abigail again.”

Hannibal chews his food, takes a moment to savor the taste of the lamb, then swallows. “Old habits die hard,” he says. “The nurses have had many negative experiences with migrant patients. I hope you don’t take it personally.”

Will’s lips twist and he lets out a sharp laugh. “Trust me, Doctor Lecter, I don’t,” he says.

Hannibal suspects that Will is lying. Hannibal suspects that much of Will Graham’s bravado is a hardened mask meant to protect the tender flesh that lies beneath it: the soft underbelly of the man Will Graham really is. Hannibal says nothing, continues chewing.

“Say, Doc,” Will says after a moment, biting his lip (Will Graham has lovely lips, Hannibal has noticed - dusky pink and full), “where are Abigail’s parents?”

Hannibal takes a sip of his own water, tries to direct his thoughts away from the subject of Will Graham’s lips. “Abigail’s parents are dead,” he tells him. “She’s an orphan.”

Will’s eyes slide down to the surface of the table, his brows creased in sympathy that he isn’t quite quick enough to hide.

More of that soft underbelly, Hannibal thinks.

“What happened to them?” Will asks. “How’d she get that scar?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know the details of Abigail’s story,” Hannibal tells him. “You’ll have to ask Margot Verger for that information. She’s very protective of the children’s backgrounds. I suspect she seeks to spare them the kind of prejudice you’ve experienced.”

“Margot Verger?” Will asks, looking up again. (Will’s eyes are lovely, too: fey-like and rimmed with dark lashes.) “Is she related to Mason Verger?”

Hannibal nods. “She is his sister,” he replies. “She runs the Verger Family Orphanage, where Abigail lives when she is not a patient here.”

“Huh,” Will says thoughtfully, and he slides his eyes back down to the table again. “Huh. Abigail’s an orphan, then. That’s too bad.”

Hannibal catches a whiff of soft underbelly; senses an opportunity to strike at the man beneath Will’s mask.

“Do you have parents, Will?” he asks, and Will’s eyes lift, his face immediately goes blank.

Ah, Hannibal chides himself, *too soon*.

“Everyone has *parents*, Doctor Lecter,” Will says blithely. “We wouldn’t be here without them, would we?”

Hannibal feels his lips curve upward. “No, I suppose not,” he says, but he knows from experience that Will Graham is not finished with him yet.

“What about *you*, Doc?” Will asks, his voice sharp. “Where are *your* parents?”

Hannibal grins. Will Graham is trying to chasten him for his rudeness by turning his probing question back onto him. It’s one of Will Graham’s favorite methods of conversation, Hannibal has noticed: deflection. He’d used it with Jack Crawford, and Hannibal has lost track of how many times Will has used it against him during their dinners. He wonders if Will Graham’s deflection is an art form used to help a killer cover his tracks, or a tool used by a run-of-the-mill vagrant who just happens to be good at staying alive.

Are you a predator, Will Graham, Hannibal wonders, *or just a cockroach with a very hard shell?*

“My parents died when I was very young,” he tells Will. “As did my younger sister. I was, like Abigail, an orphan. I was raised by my uncle.”

Hannibal watches Will Graham study him, watches Will Graham evaluate how much he should reveal.

“I never knew my mother,” Will says slowly, “she left when I was a baby. My dad did his best to raise me on his own. He was an alcoholic. We moved around a lot.”

Hannibal leans forward, unable to repress his curiosity. “Always the new boy at school?” he asks, and Will scoffs.

“*School*?” he repeats. “What *school* do you think I attended, Doctor Lecter?”

Hannibal straightens in his chair. A sobering thought has occurred to him.

“Can you read, Will?” he asks, and Will scowls, looking offended.

“Yes, I can *read*, Doctor Lecter,” he says, “I just didn’t learn to do it in school. I taught myself.”

Hannibal leans forward again. Will Graham is endlessly fascinating. How did a man from such squalid beginnings become such an erudite, slippery creature?

“What other things did you teach yourself?” Hannibal asks, and Will shrugs.

“Math. Engineering. Internal combustion engines, mostly. Boat maintenance. Carpentry. Metalworking. Anything I thought could help me make a living.”

“You learned all of that by reading?” Hannibal asks, and Will nods. Hannibal hums, marvels at Will Graham’s ingenuity. “Have you ever done any reading for pleasure, Will?”

Will Graham does not look away, but an arresting blush pinkens his delicate cheekbones. It’s an enchanting sight.

“No, Doctor Lecter,” he says, “I can’t say I’ve ever had the opportunity.”

Hannibal decides that this is unacceptable. “I’d like to bring you something to read from my personal library, Will, if you’re amenable to the idea,” he says. “You have ample time for pleasure reading, here.”

“You trying to educate me in the art of doing things for pleasure, Doctor Lecter?” Will asks, leaning back in his chair.

Hannibal feels a smile curve his lips. This is another one of Will Graham’s favorite tricks: changing the subject under the guise of flirtation. Hannibal is very familiar with this technique, as it is one he uses frequently himself.

“Among other things, I hope,” he says, and Will’s eyebrows lift. He reaches for his canister of water.

“I’ll drink to that,” he says, and he lifts the metal container skyward. “Cheers, Doctor Lecter. To education: on pleasure and other subjects.”

Hannibal lifts his own water. “Cheers, Will,” he says.

Will Graham smiles, and Hannibal studies him, his pink lips and his bright eyes, the delicate structure of his face. He thinks Will Graham is beautiful, perhaps dangerously so.

Hannibal thinks that he would have had much to teach Will Graham on the subject of pleasure, in his previous life. He thinks that he would have done so with great enthusiasm, for days on end, only releasing Will long enough to eat and clean himself.

But, he reminds himself, he is not living in his previous life.

Not anymore.

Will's Adventures in Wonderland

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is brought to you by all those scenes in the TV show where Hannibal literally says that he eats people and nobody gets it. I love them so much.
>
> Thanks as always for the comments/kudos - I so appreciate hearing your feedback :)!!

W.

Will finds that he likes reading for pleasure.

Not that he's ever been able to do it before, nor is it likely he'll ever be able to do it again after he escapes from Redlands, but for the time being, at least, he figures there's no harm in allowing himself this indulgence as he idles away the hours in Doctor Lecter's hospital. He thinks that all the reading he's been doing might even give him something to think about when he's back on the road again, facing down the endless nights and fighting back the loneliness that always seems to want to swallow him whole.

He likes *The Odyssey*, too, although he thinks Odysseus is a lying piece of shit. Will sees too much of himself in Odysseus; he resents him for it, finds himself irritated that so many of the characters Odysseus meets seem inclined to just take him at his word. Will has some of Odysseus' malicious charisma himself, his ability to twist people around his finger, and seeing this behavior reflected in the poem makes Will sick with self-loathing.

Is this what I'm like? he wonders. *Is that why Doctor Lecter brought me* this *book, and not one with a real hero?*

When Abigail catches him reading it in the garden one morning she disappears, and she rejoins him shortly afterward clutching her own book. Will cranes his neck to the battered cover and sees faded gold lettering: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

"Is that your book, Abigail?" he asks, and she nods. She sits down next to him, the doves shifting to make room for her, and she asks if he will read it to her. Will remembers his conversation with Doctor Lecter, that particular look on the Good Doctor's face when he'd asked Will if he knew how to read, and he keeps his face still. He won't be like Doctor Lecter. "Do you know how to read, Abigail?" he asks, gently, and he watches Abigail's fingers flutter, watches her eyes shift away.

“Um, a little,” she says quickly, quietly. “The teacher at the orphanage was showing me how. I know - I can do it, I’m just not very good.” She looks at Will again, her eyes wide and a crease forming between her eyebrows. “Will you read it to me, please?” she asks. “I just want to know what happens.”

Will obliges, because what else can he do? He doesn’t have the time, nor the talent, to teach Abigail to read. All he can do, he thinks, is try to get in touch with this Margot Verger and insist that Abigail get special attention from the teacher.

Abigail deserves so much better, Will thinks, and he wishes he had the capacity to give it to her, but he doesn't. What is he, after all, except a liar and a killer and an all-around piece of shit? Odysseus didn’t teach his son to read: he was too busy running around killing people on a whim, sleeping around and lying through his teeth. Will is too much like Odysseus: he’s no teacher. He’s no father.

Doctor Lecter, on the other hand, would be by far the better influence for Abigail, but what does Doctor Lecter know of the world that Will and Abigail have to live in? What does Doctor Lecter know of fear, or hunger, or longing, or loneliness? What does Doctor Lecter know of waking up and staring chaos in the face every single day?

What does Doctor Lecter know of isolation, or being an outcast?

What does Doctor Lecter know of living with a darkness that seems to bubble up out of the the pit of your very soul?

What does Doctor Lecter know of being alone, of knowing that no-one in the world will ever understand you? Will ever *see* you?

What does Doctor Lecter know about anything, with his expensive dinners and his immaculate clothing, his golden skin and his perfect, inscrutable smile? With his shiny car and his “charming wife”? His graceful shoulders and his strong arms? His smirking lips and all his smug virility?

What does Doctor Lecter know about anything? Anything at all?

Will draws in a sharp breath at this, tries to collect himself before his thoughts unspool completely beyond his control. He needs to curb his resentment, to stop it before it starts. He has found that he has a disturbing tendency to fixate on Doctor Lecter: to feel things about the Good Doctor that go well beyond the clinical curiosity with which he’s supposed to be assessing him. He has no illusions about the dangers this fixation presents.

Will can’t afford to lose his objectivity, not now. He doesn’t have to *like* Doctor Lecter, he just needs to figure out how to get what he needs from him. He doesn’t have to be Doctor’s Lecter’s *equal*, either, despite how desperately he might long for it. All he has to do is bide his time, navigate their dinnertime conversations, and figure out the best way to unlock the door to the Good Doctor’s trust.

Already, it seems to be working: the doctor flirts with him, sometimes shamelessly, and Will has caught his eyes lingering more than once over their shared meals. Will knows what’s on

his mind, when he looks at him that way. Everything is progressing according to plan; or, it should be.

It's just that Doctor Lecter gets under his *skin*, somehow; everything he does. Will knows it's at least partially sexual frustration - he can only spend so many evenings making heavy eye contact with an attractive man whose chest hair is creeping out the top of his low-cut polo shirts, after all - but that isn't all it is. The Good Doctor asks a *lot* of questions about Will's life on the road, about the things he's done to survive, about how he's managed to stitch one hobbling day to the next and keep going, and Will has answered his questions, with some exceptions, because what else can he do? But he's resented them. Every single one.

He knows that Doctor Lecter is curious about him, that he wants to know all the *lurid* details of Will's miserable life as a migrant and a general scum-of-the-earth. Will *knows* this, and he wants to give the Good Doctor what he wants, he does. He just wishes that he knew whether or not Doctor Lecter's curiosity was based on genuine interest, and not just some sort of fascinated revulsion: the kind that turns people's heads and arrests their gaze when they're met with the sight of a particularly gruesome car crash.

It doesn't help that Will is also painfully envious of Doctor Lecter. He's envious of the man's wealth and education, his self-confidence and his social graces, his all-around perfect life. He has everything that Will has ever wanted and knows that he will never have: a stable home, a loving partner. A family. Doctor Lecter could even have children, if he wanted to: could give his children everything they could possibly need and more. He could be a good father, a good teacher. A good partner; an anchor for everyone around him. He could be the chain through which Will might weave his life, stitch by stitch, until it became something better. Something stronger. Something more beautiful.

When Will starts to thinks this way - to think of all that Doctor Lecter could offer him, in some other world - he begins to think about their conversations, and to wonder what on earth compels the Good Doctor to keep coming back to the rose garden every evening for their shared dinners. He begins to wonder what Doctor Lecter could possibly see in *him* that piques his continued interest.

Will wonders what he *is* to Doctor Lecter, what the other man thinks of him. Does he see things in Will that other people don't? The darkness that seeps out at the seams of Will's soul?

Can Doctor Lecter see it? Could he call it beautiful? Could he want to keep it? To make it his own?

When Will catches himself thinking this way, he grinds himself to a halt with a lurch. He considers, with a dull sense of horror, how utterly and completely inappropriate it is to be having these thoughts. He tries to put a stop to thinking altogether.

He tries to go back to reading, to distracting himself, but he finds that doing so often ends up leading him back to the same thoughts anyway. He's either Odysseus (a liar and a piece of shit - why does anyone believe anything he says?) or he's Alice (fumbling her way through a mad world, desperately trying to make sense out of things that are senseless), and the self-loathing threads itself up out of his stomach and into his throat again.

What could Doctor Lecter possibly want with *him?*

In the end, Will finds himself going in circles, trapped in his thoughts like one of Abigail's cat's cradles.

He begins to think that maybe reading for pleasure isn't such a good idea after all.

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H.

Hannibal is filling out paperwork in his office, counting down the hours until his dinner with Will Graham, when one of the nurses knocks on his door. When Hannibal greets her, she tells him that Margot Verger is in the hospital, and that she has asked to see him. Hannibal remembers speaking to Margot at the dinner party, how there had been signs that Mason was abusing her again, and he suspects he knows the reason for Margot's visit.

He thanks the nurse for her assistance and asks where he can find Miss Verger.

"I think she went to that orphan's room," the nurse tells him. "You know, the mousy one, the girl. Brown hair. Neck scar. Wind-chafed." She shrugs. "Alison, maybe? I can't keep all their names straight."

Hannibal gives her a warm smile. This nurse has three children. He suspects that she can keep all of *their* names straight.

"Her name is Abigail Hobbs," he says, and the nurse shrugs again.

"Maybe it is," she calls, and she makes her way back down the hallway.

Hannibal thinks that, in a past life, he might have given that nurse many reasons to regret her rudeness. But in this life he simply steps out of his office and closes the door behind him. He finds Margot Verger waiting for him outside the door to Abigail's room. He stays back a moment to assess how she looks.

As usual, she appears tightly-wound and nervous, her arms crossed tight over her chest and her black-clad figure stark against the hospital's white walls. The nurses who pass all stare at her, some in mute admiration and others with scornful envy. Hannibal wonders if Margot even notices. He suspects that she has other things on her mind.

"Good afternoon, Margot," he says as he approaches, and she gives him a small, tight smile.

"Hi, Doctor Lecter," she says.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" he asks, and Margot shrugs.

“Oh, I just wanted to check in on Abigail,” she says airily, and Hannibal knows immediately that this is a lie.

“Of course,” he says. “Well, if she’s not here then I suspect that Abigail is in the rose garden. She doesn’t like to stay in her room, it seems. She has a tendency to wander.”

Margot’s lips twist. “Yeah,” she says, “I’ve noticed. She likes to eavesdrop, too. But then again, what little girl doesn’t?” She presses her lips together, darts her eyes up and down the hallway. “Can you take me to the garden, Doctor Lecter? I’d like to see her, if that’s okay.”

“Of course I can, Margot,” he says, and he extends his arm. “After you.”

They make their way down the hallway side-by-side, and Hannibal reflects on the many surreptitious visits Margot Verger has paid to him over the years in search of medical treatment. Broken wrists, sprained ankles, mottled bruises, and other painful injuries, all of which were ostensibly caused by Margot’s clumsiness. Hannibal knows, of course, who the true perpetrator is, but he plays along with Margot’s game. He respects Margot. He supposes it’s the least that he can do for her.

When they approach the rose garden, Hannibal sees Abigail Hobbs through an open window, fidgeting with a long string that seems to be tangled between her hands. Will Graham is sitting nearby, and he appears to be reading to her. Hannibal takes a moment to admire the sight of Will: his top half is in the shade, his bottom half lit by brilliant afternoon sunlight. Darkness and light, woven together. A vision.

“It looks as though we’ve found Abigail,” he says, “as I suspected.” He moves to open the door to the garden, looking forward to an unplanned encounter with Will, but Margot stops him with a hand on his arm.

“Who’s that man with her?” she asks, and Hannibal looks back out the window.

“That’s Will Graham,” he says. “He’s another one of our patients.”

Margot’s pencilled eyebrows climb, her painted lips fall open. “*Will Graham*?” she says, seemingly more to herself than to Hannibal. “The guy my brother won’t stop talking about? The guy he calls his rat on a string?”

Hannibal feels a thrill of displeasure at her words, hears a dull ringing in the space behind his right ear.

“Will Graham is the man accused of murdering one of your brother’s guards, yes,” he says, and Margot lets out a thoughtful hum.

“Wow,” she says, and Hannibal taps a finger against his leg. He finds that he is impatient with Margot’s staring.

“Would you like me to introduce you?” he asks, and Margot shakes her head.

“No, no, they look happy,” she says. “Abigail was always trying to get someone to read to her. Looks like she finally found someone to do it. I wouldn’t want to interrupt them.”

“Are you certain?” Hannibal asks, feeling a need to press the point. “You seem very curious.”

Margot lets out a quiet laugh. “Well, I just hadn’t expected him to look like *that*,” she says, and Hannibal forces a bland smile.

“Was there anything else you needed then, Margot?” he asks. He has grown weary of Margot Verger and her fascination with Will Graham.

“Actually, I was hoping we could speak privately, for a moment, if that’s okay,” she says, her voice lower now, quiet. Her fingers toy with the end of her shirt, and her eyes skate up and down the hallway again.

“Of course,” Hannibal says, remembering the real reason for her visit and resuming his professionalism. “I assume we need to discuss the continued financial support our hospital receives from the Verger family?” he asks. They’ve done this song and dance before.

“Yes, Doctor Lecter,” Margot says, giving him a tight smile. “Exactly.”

Hannibal leads Margot to his office, where he closes the door and opens a cabinet full of medical supplies. Meanwhile, Margot takes her usual seat on the edge of his desk, her fingers tight against the wood.

“What seems to be the problem, Margot?” he asks, and Margot clears her throat.

“Just some bruising, Doctor Lecter,” she says flatly. “Nothing serious.”

“I see,” he says. “Well then, let’s take a look.”

Margot draws in a breath and lifts her shirt to just below her breasts, exposing her stomach and ribs. They are, as Hannibal expected, covered with bruises.

“Try to stay still, Margot,” he says, and he begins to gently press against the bruises with his fingers. The flesh is flushed and swollen, and Hannibal suspects that one of her ribs is broken. He presses against the worst of the swelling and Margot makes a sharp, pained sound.

“I think you have a broken rib, Margot,” Hannibal tells her, and she lets out a tight breath.

“*Shit*,” she says, and Hannibal straightens.

“I can bandage it for you, if you’d like,” he says. “Unfortunately there isn’t much more we can do except wait for the rib to heal itself. I would advise that you avoid any strenuous physical activity in the meantime, and limit your movement whenever possible.”

Margot is staring at the closed door, wearing a carefully blank expression. In the sunlight pouring in through the office window, Hannibal can clearly see the makeup that covers her face, caked over the purple bloom around her left eye. He reaches into the cabinet for bandages.

“Margot,” he says, “do you mind if I ask you how you came by these injuries?”

Margot swallows, tightens her fingers around the edge of the desk when Hannibal begins to bind her ribs.

“I fell off a horse,” she says, her voice strained, and Hannibal studies a particularly gruesome bruise on her back, exactly the size and shape of a man’s fist.

“How unfortunate,” he says, and Margot draws in a shaking breath.

“Yeah,” she says. “It is.”

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W.

No matter the inner turmoil that Will faces during the day, he is always able to pull himself together before his dinners with Doctor Lecter.

By the time the doctor makes his graceful, long-legged appearance in the rose garden, Will is ready for him. He is waiting. He has taken the time he needed to slip off the vulnerability that clings to him like a veil during the daylight hours and has replaced it with the mask of sarcasm and derisive nonchalance that’s served him well for many, many years.

If the *real* Will, the Will behind the mask, is still reeling from questions that don’t bear asking, then that’s okay, because no-one will ever see him. The Good Doctor will remain none the wiser about the role he plays in Will-behind-the-mask’s reluctant daydreams. The doctor will never *meet* that Will, will never even know that he exists. He will only ever know the Will that everyone knows: a facade of arrogance and snide disinterest.

The person suit that Will wears like a second skin.

The mask Will hates so much sometimes, he feels like he could drown in it.

Dinner this evening is pork loin, served with some kind of sauce that starts with ‘C’ and skinny green beans that the doctor tells him are called ‘haricot verts’. Everything is, as usual, delicious, and Will finds himself wishing that the doctor would think to bring him a second serving next time. Dessert is some sort of whipped chocolate confection that melts in the mouth, and the Good Doctor even has the grace to nearly allow Will to finish eating it before he starts his daily barrage of probing questions.

“Are you enjoying *The Odyssey*, Will?” he asks, and Will affixes a careless smile to his face.

“I’m enjoying it very much, Doctor Lecter, thanks for asking,” he says, all prim politesse, and he goes back to his dessert. He can feel the doctor watching him, can see his lips twitch in

amusement, but Will isn't going to make it easy for him. He knows that isn't what the doctor wants.

"What are your thoughts on Odysseus?" Doctor Lecter asks, and Will shrugs.

"I think he seems like a bit of an asshole, Doc," he says. "What do *you* think about him?"

"I think he is remarkably well-suited to survival," the doctor tells him, "using his wit and his silver tongue to navigate dangerous situations that would have meant certain death for others."

Will clears his throat. "'Remarkably well-suited to survival,'" he repeats, feigning thoughtfulness. "*Say*, Doc, isn't that what you said about *me*?"

The Good Doctor is thoroughly amused now, his lips spread in a smile - a *real* smile, not the shallow affectation of one that Will sees him wear so often. The doctor's *real* smile is a different thing entirely, Will has come to understand: small lines form at the corners of his eyes, his cheeks flush with pleasure and his eyes grow bright. Sometimes it's hard for Will to look at him when he's like that. Today is no exception.

"You are correct, Will," the doctor says. "I see many similarities between yourself and Odysseus. It's why I thought you might enjoy the story."

Will lets out a discontented sound, presses his lips together and narrows his eyes. "I'll be honest, Doc: I'm not sure how I feel about that. Odysseus isn't exactly a stand-up guy - is this your way of telling me what you *really* think about me?"

The doctor's lips twitch, and he takes another bite of his dessert.

"I have the utmost respect for Odysseus, Will," he says, "as I have for you."

"Well thanks, Doc, but the point remains that the comparison isn't exactly a flattering one," Will says, twirling his spoon in his fingers. "I think I would have preferred being compared to a real hero."

"You don't think Odysseus is a hero?" the doctor asks, and Will huffs a laugh.

"No," he says frankly, "I think he's a liar and an asshole."

"Are those things mutually exclusive?" the doctor says, his smile smug, and Will feels his face curve in a grin.

Clearly you *don't think so,* he muses, but he doesn't say it.

"What do *you* think?" he says instead, and the doctor licks his lips.

"I think you're being even more evasive than usual tonight," he says, and Will shrugs, leans back in his seat.

"Odysseus would be proud of me then, wouldn't he?"

The Good Doctor purses his lips, changes his tactic. He is relentless in his inquisition. “If you are not Odysseus,” he says, “then who are you?”

Will tries to force his lips to stay closed, tries to keep the words from falling out of his mouth like a pile of tangled string onto the table between them, but he fails.

“I’ve been thinking I’m a lot like Alice,” he blurts, and the doctor straightens at this, tilts his head like a bird of prey that’s caught sight of a dormouse. Will resists the urge to curse. He usually does better than this.

“Alice?” the doctor asks, and Will sighs.

“I’ve been reading a book - *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The main character’s name is Alice, and the book is about her making her way through a fantasy world where, from what I can tell, every other thinking being has completely lost their mind.”

The doctor licks his lips, tilts his head again, runs his eyes over Will’s face with a speculative expression.

What is it that you’re seeing, Doc? Will wonders, but he stays quiet.

“And is that how you feel, Will?” the doctor asks after a moment. “Like the only sane person in an insane world?”

Will clears his throat. “Sometimes,” he says, and then he gives a bitter huff of a laugh. “I guess that’s my life, then: ‘Will’s Adventures in Wonderland’.”

The doctor studies him. “An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior,” he says, and Will feels his eyebrows lift, feels his face twist and his lips part in a disbelieving laugh.

“On what basis do you make *that* claim, *Doctor*?” he can’t help but ask, leaning forward across the table. “You’re as clean behind the ears as anyone I’ve ever met. I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but that seems like pretty shitty advice, coming from someone like *you*.”

The doctor stiffens in his seat, his face curling in a moue of displeasure. “Someone like me?” he repeats, and Will hears himself laugh again.

“Yeah, Doc,” he says. “Someone like *you*.”

“May I ask what you mean by that?” he says, and Will chuckles, bites his lower lip.

“You can ask,” he says, “but that doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

The doctor frowns. “That hardly seems fair, Will,” he says, his tone scolding, and Will feels himself grin, feels the delicious urge to keep going.

“Okay, Doc,” he says, “If I’m Odysseus, then who are *you*? Noble Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians? Poseidon? Zeus himself, perhaps?”

The Good Doctor is staring at him, his face tight. Will realizes with a distant sense of surprise that he looks genuinely offended, and like it is a wholly unfamiliar sensation to him. Will goes silent, and the air is thick and heavy between them for several moments.

“Circe,” the doctor finally says, and Will feels his eyebrows lift. He takes a moment to collect his thoughts.

“You in the habit of turning people into pigs, Doctor?” he asks, his voice carefully nonchalant, and the doctor looks away.

“When the opportunity presents itself,” he says. “Although I confess it’s been some years since I’ve had the pleasure.”

Will feels his face go blank at the doctor’s words, tastes the gamey, unforgettable tang of human flesh against the back of his tongue. He’s turned people into pigs before, too, though not in the literal sense. He’s pretty confident that isn’t what the doctor means.

“You’re an interesting guy, Doc,” Will says finally, slowly, and the Good Doctor hums, meets his eyes again.

“The feeling is mutual, Will,” he says, and something in his gaze sends a shiver down Will’s spine.

Patient Spouses

Chapter Notes

Okay everyone, we have officially reached the point in the story where Bedelia would be like "Hannibal, you need to CHILL!" if she were here. But Bedelia isn't here, and the only person telling Hannibal to chill is someone he has absolutely no intention of listening to. I'm sure it'll be fine, though ;).

Also, the name of this chapter is a pun. "Patient Spouses", because Will is Hannibal's patient. Get it? Ha ha ha ha... ha. I'll see myself out.

Thanks as always for comments and kudos!! I know it's been kind of a slow start, but things are going to pick up in the next chapter and arguably not really slow down again until the epilogue, so, I hope you enjoy :)! Happy reading.

H.

Hannibal has begun to make allowances in his routine. Slowly, but deliberately, he has begun to pause in his orderly progression throughout his day: to make note of the world around him, to make note of the particular qualities that enrich his present moment.

It began on the day that Will Graham arrived, when Hannibal followed his nose down the hallway and into Will's room to savor the scent of his fear. Will has been at the hospital for some time now, and Hannibal has allowed his newfound freedom to lead him through evenings spent in conversation in the rose garden, through afternoons spent in unplanned walks on his lunch break, and, now, through dream-like, sunlit mornings in his office.

For it truly is a beautiful morning.

Hannibal can see it through his office window: dawn spreading rose-colored fingers up from the horizon and outward, combing them through juniper and chaparral bushes and painting their dark leaves in golden light. Everything within view, from the paved road leading away from the hospital all the way to the dun-colored mountains in the distance, is cast in a heavenly blush, and Hannibal has stopped in the midst of his routine to admire the view: to savor the moment, to revel in the beauty of night giving way to day. The sight of it nearly brings tears to his eyes.

Alas, although Hannibal may now allow himself more flexibility in his routine than he has in the past, there are still outside influences that can serve to disrupt his newfound freedom.

This morning, the influence comes in the form of a knock on his office door, and although Hannibal hopes that it will be Will Graham, come to stand by his side and marvel at the beauty of the sunrise, he knows that it is not. He recognizes the sound of the knock.

“Come in,” Hannibal calls, and he is not surprised in the slightest to find that it is Doctor Sutcliffe who has opened his door, and who is standing with a strained smile on his face and a nervous tilt to his shoulders.

“Good morning, Hannibal,” he says, and Hannibal forces an amiable expression.

“Good morning, Doctor Sutcliffe,” he greets. “Am I late for rounds?”

Hannibal knows that he isn’t late for rounds. In truth, Hannibal knows that he has never once been late for rounds in the nearly seven years he’s worked at this hospital, but he says it anyway, hoping to insinuate how unnecessary it is for Doctor Sutcliffe to have ambushed him here when they’ll be speaking again in less than half an hour.

(There is Hannibal’s routine to consider, after all.)

Doctor Sutcliffe clears his throat. “Ah, no, Hannibal, you’re not,” he says, and he takes a step into the room without being invited. Hannibal bristles with displeasure. Already, the beauty of the morning seems to have departed. “I was actually hoping you and I could talk privately, for a moment.”

Hannibal straightens, rests his fingers against the surface of his desk.

“Very well,” he says, and he gestures to the door. “By all means, come in.”

Sutcliffe closes the door behind him and seats himself in one of the chairs across from Hannibal’s desk, folding his arms across his chest and licking his lips. Hannibal takes a seat as well, studying Sutcliffe and all his nervous fidgeting. He finds that he is already bored with the conversation.

“So, Doctor Sutcliffe,” he says, “what was it that you hoped to discuss?”

Sutcliffe clears his throat. “Ah, Will Graham, actually,” he says, and Hannibal feels his face go tight. He forces himself to smile.

“Will Graham?” he asks, and Sutcliffe nods, clearing his throat.

“Yeah. I’m not trying to rehash old arguments about whether or not we’re harboring a killer,” he says, “that ship has long since sailed, but at this point -” he pauses, folds his fingers in his lap and leans forward, “Hannibal, it’s been well over a month. There was nothing wrong with the guy when he got here except malnourishment and dehydration. I’ve been checking him out every night and he’s fully recovered, has been for a while now. Why is he still here?”

Somewhere in the far recesses of his mind, Hannibal can hear a ringing, can feel waves of vibration as though a bell were tolling somewhere in the space behind his right ear.

“Will Graham is my patient, Doctor Sutcliffe,” he says. “I am the head doctor of this institution, and it is my decision whether or not to release him. It is my professional opinion that Will Graham has not fully recovered from his afflictions.”

Sutcliffe lets out a breath. “Afflictions?” he repeats. “And what ‘afflictions’ are those?”

Hannibal interlaces his fingers, presses the edges of his joined hands against the surface of the desk. He finds that he is very, very angry. “Are you questioning my medical authority, Doctor Sutcliffe?” he asks, his voice steady, and he watches Sutcliffe shift nervously in his seat.

“No, Hannibal, I’m not. I don’t - it’s just-” he lets out a breath, moves his hands from his lap and wraps his fingers against the arms of the chair. “I just want to make sure you have the good of our patients in mind,” he says, “*all* of them. The nurses tell me you’ve been having dinner with Will Graham every night. I want to make sure that your… concern over Will Graham’s safety isn’t making you lose sight of your professional boundaries. I get it if you’re worried that something is going to happen to Will when he leaves here, but this isn’t a convent anymore, Hannibal. It’s a hospital. We offer medical care, not sanctuary.”

“And that is your professional opinion?” Hannibal asks, his tone sharp, lancing, and Sutcliffe swallows.

“Yeah, Hannibal,” he says. “It is.”

“In that case, thank you, Doctor Sutcliffe,” Hannibal says, and he rises to stand in a swift movement. “I will bear that into consideration as I continue my evaluation of Will Graham’s recovery.”

Sutcliffe grimaces, but he moves to stand himself, understanding the unspoken dismissal.

“Okay, great, Hannibal,” he says, and he steps to the doorway. He pauses for a moment, one hand on the doorknob and a hesitant look on his face. “Try not to take this personally, Hannibal. We’re on the same side here. Just - think about what I said, okay?”

“Of course, Doctor Sutcliffe,” Hannibal says. “I’m grateful that you brought your concerns to me.”

This is a lie, of course. In truth, Hannibal has no intention of thinking about Doctor Sutcliffe’s concerns. In truth, Hannibal plans to tuck this conversation away alongside countless arguments with Alana in the box in his mind labeled “A Matter of Little Concern.” But he doesn’t say this to Doctor Sutcliffe. Instead, he watches the man exit his office and he takes deep, calming breaths as the ringing in his ears gradually subsides.

No; in truth, Hannibal will not spare any time nor effort to thoughts of Doctor Sutcliffe and his opinions. Thoughts of Will Graham and *his* opinions, on the other hand, occupy a great deal of Hannibal’s time.

In fact, Hannibal has built an entirely new structure in his mind solely for the purpose of storing thoughts and memories associated with Will Graham. It is a place unlike any he has

ever created before: a sun-dappled courtyard where bougainvillea and rose bushes bloom, where orange trees bear heavy fruit and ringneck doves take shelter in the shade. Hannibal has planted the flowers himself, has tucked searching rose roots into rich, fertile soil, has threaded reaching bougainvillea vines up curved, arching awnings. He has tasted fruit from the orange trees, has released the doves from their gilded metal cages and watched them embrace their newfound freedom amidst the riotous cacophony of color. Hannibal has created this place: for himself, and for Will.

Will Graham is like a puzzle box, or an oil painting, or an altar. He is a thing of mystery, of layers, of shadows and secrets. Hannibal is enthralled by him. He spends as many hours as he can in the sun-dappled courtyard in his mind, thinking about him.

It's obvious that Will Graham is a liar, and almost assuredly a killer as well. It's obvious that the persona he presents to the world is a fabrication. The question is: how much of it is false? And, perhaps more enticingly: what is to be known of the man behind the mask?

Hannibal hasn't been this inspired by anything since Florence, since he allowed himself to indulge in habits that led to his admittedly less-than-elegant escape across the Atlantic.

He hasn't been this inspired by anything since he came to understand why restraint was perhaps the only way to guarantee his continued survival.

But the lessons of Florence are neither here nor there with regards to Will Graham, because Hannibal is practicing restraint with regards to Will Graham. He *is*.

He has a curiosity about Will, to be sure: a fascination and, admittedly, a certain amount of desire for him, but he is keeping himself in check. He is careful with regards to his behavior.

He has maintained his routine, after all; simply modified it to better suit his needs. He may allow himself moments of freedom to savor the world around him, and, more regularly, moments to allow for the presence of Will Graham in his life, but he has not allowed himself to indulge the true depths of his curiosity about Will.

He only allows himself to look out the windows into the rose garden at four points in the day: 8:00 am, 11:00 am, 1:30 pm, and 3:15 pm sharp. He only allows himself to watch Will sleeping when the man does so in his room, because he has decided that it is reasonable as an extension of his role as Will's doctor. He only allows himself to serve Will the food he's made for him once a day, while the other two meals he's brought for Will are sent out through the hospital kitchens. There are other examples, of course, but Hannibal doesn't feel the need to dwell on them. He has no doubts whatsoever about the infallibility of his own self-control.

Will Graham is not a threat to Hannibal's restraint. He isn't. He is a source of fascination, certainly, perhaps to the point of fixation, but he is not an obsession. Hannibal is certain it will not get out of hand.

Hannibal looks back out the window, at dawn's fingers, reaching upwards. It really is a beautiful morning.

+++

W.

Abigail tells Will that she's leaving, and he spends the morning trying to figure out why everything around him seems darker.

How can Abigail leave? He wonders. *How can anyone think she's* well *enough to leave?*

To Will's eyes, Abigail still looks sick. She's still so thin, still so gaunt, still so nervous and timid. She still has shadows under her eyes. She still presses shaking fingers against the scar on her neck when she thinks that no-one's looking, and she still struggles to finish her meals. She's still so fearful, still so vulnerable. *She's just a little girl*, Will thinks, *how can anyone possibly think that she's okay?*

He doesn't say any of this to Abigail, of course. Instead, he crouches down and returns the hug she offers, telling her to behave herself and finish all her meals, even the ones she doesn't like. Abigail tucks her face against his neck, and when she draws away his skin is wet from her tears.

"I don't want to go back," she tells him, and Will swallows against the horrible quavering in the pit of his stomach.

"I'm sorry, Abigail," he tells her, "but sometimes we have to do things we don't want to do. It's a part of life."

"Why?" she asks, and Will presses his lips together, feels the pit in his stomach grow wider. He doesn't have an answer for her.

"Abigail," a woman's voice calls, and Will rises to stand, finds to his horror that his legs feel unsteady. Abigail freezes at the sound and then moves closer to Will, weaving her small fingers through his.

"Hi Miss Verger," she says, and Will watches a beautiful woman step through the doorway into the rose garden. She has dark hair and dramatic features, and Will doesn't think he's ever seen anyone wear so much makeup. The doves part around her feet but they don't fly away, and she lets out a quiet laugh when she steps around them.

"Don't mind me," she tells them, and when she gets close enough to introduce herself she rests blank, black-ringed eyes on Will's face.

"Hi, Will Graham," she says, and she extends a slender hand. "My name is Margot Verger."

"Hi," Will says slowly, and he thinks to himself that any reason Margot Verger has for knowing his name probably isn't a good one. Abigail is still holding his hand and seems loathe to let it go, so Will doesn't return the offered handshake. "It's nice to meet you."

Margot glances down at Abigail, who blinks back at her in what Will supposes must be her small version of defiance, and she drops her hand with another slow smile.

“Ah, don’t take this the wrong way,” Will says after a moment, “but how do you know my name?”

“My brother,” Margot says frankly, lifting her thin eyebrows and tilting her head like a cat. “He talks about you all the time. But it was Doctor Lecter who pointed you out.”

“Ah,” Will says, and Abigail tightens her grip on his fingers.

“I don’t want to go back, Miss Verger,” she says in a quiet voice, and Will wonders how long she’s been building up the courage to say that. “I want to stay here. I want to stay with Mister Will.”

Margot’s face tightens and she darts her eyes around the rose garden, as if scanning her surroundings for a hidden threat. She lowers herself so that she is eye level with Abigail, and Will watches her expensive-looking scarf trail in the dust. He wonders why on earth she’s wearing a scarf and long sleeves in this weather, and he thinks that perhaps it’s some peculiarity of the rich.

“I know, Abigail,” Margot says, “and I’m sorry. But you have to go. It’s your home now.”

“No it’s not!” Abigail shouts, an unexpected surge of anger in her voice, and a flash of hurt crosses Margot’s face before she smooths it out and resumes her placid demeanor.

“Abigail, would it make you feel better if Will promised to visit you?” she asks, and Abigail sniffs, smears her free hand across her teary face.

“Maybe,” she says in a quieter voice.

Margot withdraws a handkerchief from her purse and extends it to Abigail, who takes it and begins to wipe the tears that continue to stream down her cheeks.

“How about this, Abigail,” Margot says, “how about you sit over there for a few minutes and think about it, and Will and I will take a little walk and when we’re done we’ll come back to you. Does that sound okay?”

Abigail has stopped crying, has drawn in a long, ragged breath and let it out with such a defeated slump to her little shoulders that it sends sharp, needle-like stings through Will’s chest.

“Okay,” she says dully, and she releases Will’s hand. She makes her way to her usual spot by the wall with slow, stumbling steps, and for a moment Will allows himself to dream. For a moment, Will allows himself to consider running. He allows himself to consider rescuing Abigail from her sad, lonely little life and trying to make a better world for her somewhere far away from here.

He allows to believe that he could do it.

But then he remembers who he is, and what he is, and why he's still in Redlands in the first place. And then he remembers why he doesn't allow himself to dream anymore.

"Will?" Margot says, her voice curious, and Will wonders how long she's been trying to get his attention. "Mind if we take a little walk?" she asks, and Will presses two fingers against the bridge of his nose, trying to clear his thoughts.

"Makes no difference to me," he says.

Margot raises her eyebrows at this, her mouth twisting in a smirk. "Charming!" she tells him, and she studies him for a moment before linking her arm through his, tugging him close in a gesture of forced camaraderie. "What say we make our way away from the hospital for a moment then, Mister Graham?" she says. "The walls have ears, and all that."

Will says nothing but he doesn't resist her, and he allows himself to be led down the gravel path away from the hospital, toward the little stream that he and Abigail have visited so frequently during their morning walks. Margot doesn't speak again until they're well out of sight of the hospital, and when she does she pulls her arm free and steps away from him. She starts rifling through her purse.

"Thanks for looking after Abigail," she says. "That girl needs as much kindness as she can get. Unfortunately, kindness isn't exactly a surplus commodity at the Verger Family Orphanage." There is an edge of bitterness to her voice so sharp that Will can't resist pressing his fingers against it.

"And whose fault is *that*?" he asks. He finds that he is very angry. "Abigail's?"

Margot stops looking through her purse, presses it against her side and steps closer to Will. She peers up into his face, meets his gaze and holds it. Will makes no attempt to temper his expression, and after several moments Margot seems to make a decision.

"My brother's," she says finally, looking away. "It's my brother's fault." She goes back to rifling through her purse.

Will is unsatisfied with her answer. "Can't you do anything about it?" he asks, and Margot finally withdraws a cigarette from her bag, fumbling her fingers over the lighter.

"Wow, great idea, Will Graham," she says, her voice snappish. "You know, you're a smart guy. I wish I had thought of that myself. I could have done something *years* ago. Silly Margot, you just never learn, do you?"

Will stiffens, and he takes a moment to look at Margot, to *really* look at her: her slim, reedy figure clad all in black, the spots on her neck where her makeup is flaking away, the way her fingers seems to stutter over her lighter. He remembers Doctor Lecter's words, considers that Mason Verger may be untouchable even for her. His anger doesn't go away, but he decides there's no use directing it at Margot Verger anymore.

"What happened to Abigail?" he asks, and Margot swallows, finally steadies her fingers enough to light the cigarette.

“She was almost murdered by her father,” she replies, her voice flat, and Will feels shock crawl down his back like ice water. “She’s only alive because Sheriff Crawford rained bullets into him like it was the end of days. Abigail was there, of course. Watched it all happen while she bled out on the floor.”

Will is shocked by her bluntness, by the cruelty of her words and the detachment with which she’s speaking them.

“Does she have any other family?” he asks, and Margot takes a long draw of the cigarette. “What about her mother?”

“Mother’s dead, and no other family that we’re aware of,” Margot tells him. “She and her father were both migrants. They were staying in the camp before he had his… incident. No-one knows where they were before that. Abigail won’t talk about it.”

Will turns away from Margot, presses his face against his hands and tries to calm the roiling sickness in his gut. Despite the years he’s spent building an armor against it, he is still amazed by the unimaginable cruelty of the world, especially with regards to those who least deserve it.

“Are you going to look after her?” he asks, and Margot clears her throat.

“I do the best I can,” she says, “but we have a lot of other kids, Will, and they all have their own tragedies.” She takes another long draw of her cigarette, blows the smoke out in a smooth plume and clears her throat. “Abigail just happens to be a particularly unique variety of tragedy.”

Will scuffs his foot against the gravel, feels keenly the brittle sting of his own powerlessness. Margot takes another draw of her cigarette.

“Are you going to visit her?” she asks, and Will turns his face to look at her. Her expression is unnerving, utterly blank and seemingly immobile. Will lets out a long breath.

“Yeah,” he says at last, “I’ll visit her.”

Margot’s face changes, then, relaxes back into its earlier state of blithe amusement.

“Good,” she says, and she tosses the cigarette into the gravel, grinds it down into the dust with her heel. She steps forward again, linking her arm back through Will’s and tugging him back up the path toward the hospital. “The world is a festering shithole of a place, Will Graham,” she tells him, “the least we can do is try not to make it worse.”

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H.

Hannibal would have vastly preferred to decline Jack Crawford's invitation to dinner, but Alana is immovable on the subject.

"Hannibal, they're our *friends*," she says, flushed with the conviction of the self-assured oblivious. "And besides, I've hardly seen you lately. Don't try to get out of it. I won't let you!"

Unfortunately, there is nothing for Hannibal to do in the face of such an onslaught except to acquiesce. He knows that he is expected to go - knows that, before Will Graham's arrival, he would have accepted the invitation without resistance regardless of how much he wanted to decline. However, along with inspiring Hannibal to modify his routine, Will Graham's presence in Redlands has also changed Hannibal's outlook, slightly, on the matter of expectations, and of his requirement to fulfill them. Although he submits in the face of insistence, somewhere in the deepest part of him Hannibal feels a rumbling of discontent. He wonders if perhaps the beast is finally beginning to resist the trappings of his person suit.

Dinner is uninspired but palatable. Hannibal is always pleasantly surprised by the tasteful appointment of Sheriff Crawford's home, but he supposes that it is more Bella Crawford's doing than Jack's. He can't particularly imagine Jack Crawford poring over imported Italian floral wallpapers in search of the one best suited to a dining room. In fact, he doubts that Jack Crawford even notices, doubts that Jack Crawford has any idea whatsoever that the wallpaper in his dining room is more valuable than most of the vehicles in Redlands.

Hannibal studies a particularly beautiful rose sprawled across the wall across from him and he thinks about Will. He wonders if Will is enjoying the meal that he had prepared for him, wonders if Will is eating it in the rose garden in his absence or if he has stayed in his room to dine this evening. He finds himself wondering how Will will occupy his dinner hours without their daily conversation, wonders if perhaps the heat of the day will drive Will to strip himself of his shirt and long pants, to stretch himself on his stomach on the small cot in his room and press his face into the pillow in search of relief.

"So, Doctor Lecter," Jack says, and Hannibal is forced from his musings with an unpleasant sensation, "a little bird tells me that Will Graham is still staying at your hospital."

Hannibal clears his mind of visions of Will naked and prone on a hospital bed and forces an easy smile to curve his lips. "What an extraordinary bird," he says, catching Alana's gaze, "to be able to speak." He winks, gives a charming grin to his wife as she rolls her eyes across the table.

"My husband likes to evade subjects he doesn't want to discuss with playful banter like that," she tells Jack, and Jack chuckles.

"And you have some experience with this tactic of his, I take it?" he asks, and Alana smirks.

"Yes I do," she tells him. She turns her gaze to Bella Crawford, who is seated beside Hannibal and eating her meal in small, measured bites. "Does Jack have any evasion tactics

he uses with you?" she asks, and Bella gives her a blank smile as Jack lets out a booming laugh.

"I think my Bella here knows there's no keeping me from something once I've set my mind to it," he says, and Bella tips her head.

"It's true," she says, and Jack reaches across the table, catches his wife's hand in his and presses the back of it against his lips.

"My beautiful Bella," he says, "the most patient woman in the world."

"You're in good company, Bella," Alana tells her, "because I'm pretty sure my husband is the most patient man in the world."

Hannibal gives his wife a smile as Jack Crawford lifts his wine glass.

"To patient spouses," he says grandly, and Alana raises her wine with a grin. Hannibal lifts his own glass and forces an amiable smile, while in the periphery of his vision he sees that Bella is doing the same.

"Cheers!" they all say, and the glasses chime delicately as their holders tap them together.

Hannibal resists the urge to return to the vision of Will naked on a hospital bed while Jack Crawford clears his throat. Jack is like a bulldog who has caught the scent of blood, Hannibal knows. He will not relent until he is forced to do so.

"But in all seriousness, Hannibal," Jack says, "is it true that Will Graham is still in your hospital?"

Hannibal takes a sip of wine, lets it linger on his tongue. He subdues the anger that is sparking through his chest and arms and down into his fingers, ignores the ringing of the bell in the space behind his right ear.

"Yes," he says evenly, "he is."

"And have you observed any… suspicious behavior from him?" Jack asks, pressing his elbows against the tablecloth and leaning forward over his plate. "Has he left the hospital for any reason? Had any visitors? Said anything… unusual?"

Hannibal clears his throat, adjusts the angle at which his fork and knife rest on the edge of his plate. "Is this a dinner among friends, Jack, or a police investigation?" he asks. "If it's the latter, I would have preferred if you'd said so in the invitation."

Alana's eyebrows draw together. "A police investigation?" she asks. "Who's being investigated?"

Hannibal meets her gaze, forces a look of concern to crease his forehead. He knows perfectly well how to derail Jack Crawford from this line of questioning. Flirtation is not his only means of evasion, after all.

“A patient of mine,” Hannibal tells her, “a man named Will Graham. A migrant who arrived in Redlands penniless and in poor health. Jack Crawford has accused him of murder, despite not having any evidence to prove it.”

As expected, his wife’s face flushes and her eyes glint with anger. She turns to face Jack with a scowl.

“Jack!” she cries, “We’ve talked about this before! You can’t just assume all migrants are criminals!”

Jack lets out a breath, presses two large fingers against the bridge of his nose. Hannibal takes a sip of wine to prevent himself from smirking.

Hannibal has witnessed his wife and Jack Crawford argue many, many times over the years, and he knows that once started they will gladly occupy themselves this way for the rest of the evening. Jack and Alana are very much alike: both are utterly steadfast in their certainty of their own rightness, and both are utterly oblivious to the existence of their own blind spots, to the mere concept of the possibility that they could ever be wrong.

“I’m not just *assuming*, Alana,” Jack says, “I have a *feeling* about this one.”

Alana’s eyes widen, her brows dip down into a sharp ‘V’. “Jack,” she cries, “you can’t just ruin a man’s life based on a *feeling*!”

Hannibal picks up his knife and fork again and proceeds with eating his meal. Inwardly, he congratulates himself on a job well done. Beside him, Bella takes another sip of her wine as the other two occupants of the table raise their voices to the level of a quiet din.

Bella has said little during the meal, Hannibal thinks; in fact, there were times when he would have forgotten her presence altogether if not for the smell of her French perfume. He glances at her, noticing that she looks pale, her features drawn. He wonders if perhaps she’s ill.

“How are you, Bella?” he asks, and she gives him a placid smile.

“Me, Doctor Lecter?” she says. “Why, I’m just fine.”

A Fish That Isn't Hungry

Chapter Summary

Astute observers will notice that I have added a new tag for this fic! So, yeah, spoiler alert that that happens in this chapter, lol! I haven't upped the rating to explicit yet because the scene isn't too graphic, but heads up that the rating will be going up soon.

I am very excited to share this week's update. I love this chapter a whole, whole lot, and not just because it's the beginning of the smutty portion of the story (although that's fun too!). I love this chapter because it's also the beginning of the ~drama~ part of this story, and drama and angst are honestly my absolute favorite thing (if any of you have read my other fic "The Great Glass Doors," you know what I mean lol), so I am sooo excited to get to that part of this story too. I hope you all enjoy it :).

Thanks as always for reading!! <3

W.

There is something that happens to the air in the rose garden in the late afternoon. It seems to take on a physical shape, seems to drape itself across Will's body like a lover in search of mindless pleasure. It seems to run its fingers through Will's hair, to trace droplets of sweat down the sloping curve of his spine, past the swell of his ass and down into the dark places where he longs to be touched.

Its hands seem to take on the size and shape of Doctor Lecter's - or perhaps that's just a trick of the breeze.

The heat of the day reaches its peak in the late afternoon, reaches a state so stifling and monumental that it seems to alchemize the scent of the roses. The odor becomes a powder, a powder that coats Will's tongue and creeps down the back of his throat, that makes his mouth water, that makes his eyes fill with tears. The air seems to press probing fingers against Will's skin, testing for openings, looking for a way in. Sometimes he feels drunk with it. Sometimes he feels sick.

Abigail has been gone for two weeks now, and there is nothing left to protect Will from his thoughts of Doctor Lecter. He tries to evade them in the morning hours, tries to build a fort in his mind through reading and exercise and walks to the stream, but the thoughts are always there. They circle above his fort like carrion birds, casting long, heavy shadows on the hastily-piled stone. By lunchtime, an earthquake begins, the result of some seismic movement in areas of his mind where Will would rather not venture: he's caught a hint of a

white coat moving down a hallway, tasted a sip of orange juice so fresh it makes his lips tingle, brushed his own fingers against his neck in a way he's seen Doctor Lecter touch a rose petal. And then, without fanfare, his fort crumbles back to the earth, and the Good Doctor sidles in among the rubble as though he belongs there; as though he has always belonged there.

The hospital is changing him. Will feels like a stone-fruit, gone so ripe and heavy with juices as to be at risk of rotting. His movements feel silken, his limbs gone languorous and constantly flushed with sensation. Clothes that once hung loose on his frame now cling tightly to firm flesh, tease at his skin like pressing fingers. Hair that once fell lank and dull around his ears now curls and shines in the sunlight, now teases at his neck every time the wind blows. He feels *good* - better than he's felt in years. He looks *good* - better than he's looked in years. And he's not the only one who's noticed.

Will is certain, now, that Doctor Lecter desires him. It is not a matter of arrogance or self-aggrandizement, it is a matter of certainty: a reality of the world around him, as present and undeniable as the gravel at Will's feet. Both men are poised upon the edge of a precipice and gazing over it, their eyes cast down into the roiling sea below. They are suspended and motionless, waiting for something to happen. But for Will's plan to work, for the plucking marionette-fingers of his influence to truly grasp at the Good Doctor's strings, they cannot stand on the edge of this precipice forever. One of them has to step over it. *Doctor Lecter* has to step over it.

Will is good at this game, he is good at exercising his influence. He knows that he can't take the marionette-strings by force, he knows that the doctor has to hand them over willingly. The question is: how to convince him to finally do it?

Will tries to think about the situation logically, to consider it from Doctor Lecter's perspective. He is a married man, prominent in his community, well-liked and respected. He is married and has an ever-present outlet for his sexual desires; he does not need a physical relationship with Will in order to find release. His life is clean, orderly, sanitary, and predictable: if the Good Doctor's life were a garden, it would be all daisies and well-tended topiary, with a nearby a picnic basket always ready and waiting in case he should grow hungry. To him, Will must seem like one of the bushes in the rose garden: beautiful, but tangled, and run through with thorns.

How to tempt the Good Doctor forward, then? How to lure him out of his garden of peaceful daisies and trimmed hedges? How to lure him into the shadow of branches where pleasure and pain beckon in equal measure? How to catch a fish that isn't hungry?

Will thinks about fishing. He thinks about setting traps. He thinks about a fish who has seen many, many lures during the long years of its life; he thinks about the fish who has seen its friends and family fall victim to the glinting flash of temptation. He thinks about the fish that every angler tries to catch, that has seen so many enterprising fishermen try to snare it that it has grown bored with their attempts. He thinks that such a fish would likely end up believing that the lure will always be there for it.

He wonders, then, what such a fish would do if the fisherman decided to remove himself from the stream entirely. Would the fish follow him? Crawl its way up on land, seeking the

lure that proved irresistible simply by nature of being no longer available?

Will thinks that it is worth a try. He thinks that, at the very least, he cannot bear another month spent idling his days away in the rose garden, waiting for something to happen.

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H.

A healthy Will Graham is a sight more beautiful than Hannibal could have imagined.

He'd suspected it, of course: that mere months in his care would transform Will Graham from the sallow, sickly creature of that first day in the hospital into a young man flush with vitality and life. He had, however, perhaps underestimated the effect that such a transformation would have on him. He had failed to consider how much effort it might take to resist him.

If Will Graham was beautiful before (in a tragic sort of way: in the way that Saint Sebastian is beautiful, his flesh run through with arrows, bleeding out but with his eyes still turned skyward), he is nothing short of magnificent now. His skin is pale but it is healthy, clear and smooth as alabaster, and it flushes an arresting shade of pink whenever Will Graham laughs. His dark hair falls around his face in the sort of cherubic curls that would not seem out of place on the walls of an Italian cathedral. His white throat curves and dances like a swan's, his lips purse and curl and shine and remind Hannibal keenly of the pink buds on the rose bushes, swaying in the breeze. Will Graham's eyes are guarded but bright, assessing Hannibal over their shared meals with an intelligence that makes Hannibal's skin prickle.

So, Hannibal was right. One month at his table and Will Graham's body was returned to its rightful suppleness; two months at his table, and Will Graham has been transformed entirely. The knowledge brings a quiet sense of satisfaction to Hannibal, plants a smoldering coal of possessiveness in his gut and fans it every time that Will Graham looks at him.

If this is Will Graham after two months in Hannibal's care, what will he be like after two more? After six? Or even a year?

How long spent eating from Hannibal's hand before the man behind Will Graham's mask feels fit to show his face? Should feel fit to join them at their table? Hannibal finds that he is immeasurably curious. He finds that he does not mind the wait. He finds that he is willing to give Will Graham all the time he needs to show his true self.

It is a pleasant thought, he thinks: Will Graham's presence, constant and immutable in the innumerable coming days. A brightness, a splash of color, a rose bush reaching upwards; sunlight on a sprawling courtyard, casting light and shadow both over the illuminated pages of Hannibal's life. He finds that he wants it very much.

And these are the sorts of thoughts that occupy Hannibal's mind while he is eating almond cake in the rose garden, enjoying the scent of the air and the way the evening's warmth presses against his neck like fingers, when Will Graham tells him that he is leaving.

It is stated without fanfare, with all the practiced nonchalance that Will Graham uses for all delicate subjects, and Hannibal finds that he does not know what to say. He finishes chewing his almond cake, notes that the light, delicate taste has turned bitter and cloying in his mouth. He takes a drink of water, tries to assess the swarm of sensations tangling in his gut. He finds that he is angry. He finds that he is offended. He finds that he feels, perhaps most bewilderingly, betrayed. He finds that there is a ringing coming from somewhere in the space behind his right ear.

How can one be betrayed by a facade of a person? he asks himself. *How can one unwittingly grow to trust a mask?*

"You are not fully recovered, Will," he hears himself say, and Will's lips curve into that arresting half-smile with which he seems to enjoy taunting Hannibal.

"I don't know, Doc," he says, his voice light, easy, all honey-sweet enticement, "I feel pretty good. Especially lately."

Hannibal sees the invitation in his posture, reads the proposition in his words, but he does not allow himself to reciprocate.

"If you leave, it will be against medical advice," he says instead, focusing his eyes back down on his almond cake. "I cannot attest to the likelihood of your continued health."

"Maybe you'll have to come and check on me, then," Will says, his voice still seeking, his words still probing for an entrance. *Let me in*, they seem to say, *let me in*. Hannibal feels them like fingers down his spine.

"I am very busy here, Will," he says, his voice clipped and clinical, no longer warm with the easy camaraderie of their previous conversations. "I am not at liberty to make house calls."

Will lets out a thoughtful sound at this, shifts in his seat, takes a long swallow of ice water and leans forward across the small table.

"That's too bad, Doc," he says. "I think we might have been very good friends."

Hannibal studies Will Graham across the table: the slight flush of pink across his delicate cheekbones, his dark-rimmed eyes, his lips still wet with ice water, and he allows himself to dream. He allows himself to imagine rising from the table, to imagine leading Will Graham into his office and locking the door behind them, allows himself to imagine offering himself to Will Graham like a feast.

(But this is impossible, he tells himself: his office is his sanctuary, the haven where he mends the loose threads of his person suit, double-checks the stitching and makes sure the fabrication is still airtight. To invite Will Graham there, to allow him into that sacred space,

would be tantamount to opening his doors for a hurricane. He can never afford to take such a risk.)

So if not his office, then, Hannibal thinks, perhaps Will's room. They cannot lock the door, but they could be quiet. If they were careful, no-one would seek them out. He could strip Will Graham of his threadbare cotton shirt, could trace the tendrils of sweat that coil down his throat and chest, could send searching fingers farther south, could take Will Graham into his hand, could press his legs apart in search of hidden places, could press his lips against Will's ear and whisper, "Are you sure, Will? Are you sure that you no longer want to stay?"

But then Hannibal reminds himself who he is, and what he is, and why allowing himself to have what he wants is such a dangerous, impossible thing. He reminds himself of everything he has built, here, through the power of his own self-control. He reminds himself of what might happen should he lose it.

So he does not rise from the table, he does not take Will Graham into some dark place and coax out the pleasure that lies waiting in his body like a harvest of ripe fruit. Instead, he takes another bite of almond cake, goes through the practiced motions of chewing and swallowing, licks his lips and clears his throat.

"It is a shame, Will," he says, instead of all the things that he would rather say, instead of all the things that he would rather do. "I will miss our conversations."

Across the table, Will is watching him, his eyes narrowed, his gaze assessing. Hannibal thinks that Homer was incorrect. If ever the gods created sirens, they must all have looked like Will Graham.

"Yeah," Will finally says, "yeah. I'll miss our conversations too."

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W.

The campsite isn't great, but Will has made do with worse. The most important thing is that it's private: it's far enough away from the migrant camp and the well-lit town center as to feel like another world entirely. It's far enough away that any sounds let loose in the darkness will not be carried to listening ears. It's far enough away that even fish who are not hungry may feel inclined to take a bite.

Will spends the afternoon trying to restore his living quarters. He'd retrieved his truck from the Redlands police department early that morning and found that the small living cabin in the back had been unsurprisingly turned upside down in their initial search for evidence. Will knows that his truck is unusual, and he knows that most people tend to read anything unusual

as immediately suspicious. And, admittedly, Will *had* built the little cabin in the truck bed because he has learned during his time on the road that he *needs* a place of privacy: a place away from prying eyes to test at the stitching of his mask, to pull himself together when it goes threadbare at the seams and threatens to come apart entirely. His truck and its little cabin in the back are unusual, yes, and they have been put to use more than once while Will recovered himself from some murder or another, but he would never be stupid enough to leave evidence there. He knows better than that. And so the search for it had been fruitless, and all the destruction wrought on Will's little home had been for nothing in the end.

Will strips the blankets from his the cot, throws open the shutters over paneless windows cut into the aluminum siding, sweeps out the dust and debris trailed inside by the boots of countless police officers. He drags his clothes and linens to a nearby stream, scrubs them with powder soap and lays them out to dry in the sun. He mops the floor of the truck bed, dusts the small table, cleans out the bucket used for storing water and washes his small collection of dishes by hand. He digs a firepit and starts a fire, and he is just beginning to feel the initial tendrils of hunger reaching upward from his stomach (*So soon*, Will thinks - he's become spoiled in Doctor Lecter's hospital) when a truck appears on the horizon.

Will casts his eyes to it, surveys it as it draws closer, and he wonders who it could be. He is tense, at first, his mind combing over potential weapons within reach around him, but as the vehicle comes near he realizes that it's unlikely any police officer would ever drive it. Nor would one of the Vergers, and certainly not Doctor Lecter.

It's a miracle that truck is still moving at all, Will thinks, and he wonders again who it could be. It is not until the truck pulls up before him, until it comes to a stop and the driver cuts the engine, that Will understands.

"Hey there, Molly Foster," he says, and he feels a laugh escape his chest at the sight of the woman emerging from the driver's side. Molly shuts the door behind her with a slam and grins at him, hoisting a large basket against her hip.

"Hi, Will Graham," she says, and for a moment her eyes widen, moving down the length of his body and back again while her arms go slack. Then her eyes meet Will's and she flushes bright pink, and she turns her gaze quickly to the passenger door. Wally is emerging from it with his skinny arms clutching a large jug, and Molly clears her throat. "Wally, honey, you need some help with that?" she asks, her voice slightly hoarse, and Wally shakes his head.

"No, I'm okay," he says, and Will realizes, suddenly, why they are here.

They brought me dinner, he thinks, and he resists the urge to laugh. He wonders if Doctor Lecter would be offended by how quickly he has been replaced.

"Apparently news travels fast around here," he says, and Molly blushes.

"Yeah, well, there's not much going on," she admits. "One of our neighbors at the camp cleans at the hospital sometimes, and she told us you were gone this morning. Someone else said they'd seen someone setting up a camp here and we figured it must be you."

Will smiles, but his skin prickles at the knowledge that he is being watched by so many eyes.

“And you brought me dinner?” he asks, gesturing to the basket, and Molly blushes again, meets his gaze and then looks down at her feet.

“Oh, this,” she says, and she clears her throat. “Well, we know how hard it can be getting set up, Lord knows we wouldn’t have made it if people hadn’t helped us. Sorry if we’re overstepping, I just thought that, I - I wondered if you would, it seemed like you might-”

Will laughs and moves to stand before her, sliding his arm under the handles of the picnic basket and watching while her face turns a brighter shade of pink, watching while she draws her freed arms back against her body as though she has been burned.

“Apologizing for doing something nice again, Molly?” he asks, and she lets out an awkward bark of a laugh.

“God, yeah, I guess I am,” she says, and she presses a palm against her forehead. “It was Wally’s idea,” she tells him, and Will smiles over at Wally, who is studying him with a look of intense concentration.

“You look a lot better,” he says. “You don’t look like you’re going to die any more.”

Will huffs a laugh at that, glances over at Molly and sees that she looks mortified. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” he says, “and it’s all thanks to you two. And here you are, doing me a favor again. Really, I can’t thank you enough.”

“I hope you like bean stew,” Molly says in a strained tone, “it’s a camp specialty. We brought cornbread, too, and some water from the well. I wasn’t sure what the drinking water situation would be like out here.”

Will looks down at the basket in his hands, feels that it is heavy with the food they’ve brought. He glances back at Molly and Wally, takes in their careworn faces and their uncomplicated eagerness to help him. He thinks about Abigail, the way she thanked him for reading to her, for playing cat’s cradle with her, for treating her like something other than a particularly unique variety of tragedy. He thinks about families, about all the things that human beings can be to one another that have nothing to do with masks, that have nothing to do with plucking marionette strings, and somewhere inside of him, something moves.

“Thank you,” he hears himself say. “Really. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

Molly spreads an old gingham blanket over the dusty earth and the three of them sit cross-legged upon it, sharing their humble meal of bean stew and cornbread, and Will wonders about Wally’s father. He wonders what happened to the man that Molly had opened her arms to, that had helped bring Wally into the world. He wonders if there is a reason that mother and son alike were so anxious to help a destitute man left starving on the side of the road. He wonders about the story of their tragedy.

They talk about simple things: about the odd jobs Molly performs around town in an attempt to make a living, how Wally helps pick oranges at the Verger Groves on Tuesdays and Thursdays, how they’ve been trying to improve the living conditions at the migrant camp and keep the levels of sickness down. Wally tells Will that there are baseball games in the camp

sometimes and that someday he wants to play in the major leagues. Will tells them little about himself except that he is grateful.

At the end of the meal, Wally and his mother pack up their blanket and their dishes, but they leave the rest of the food with Will.

“Just to help you until you get on your feet,” Molly tells him, and Wally nods.

“We have enough,” he says, and Will takes their offering without resistance.

When Molly asks Wally to wait for her in the truck, Will thinks that he knows what she is going to say.

“Listen, I… just wanted to let you know, you’re always welcome at the camp,” she tells him, and as she speaks her skin grows pink, and her eyes dart down to her feet. “I figure it might get kind of lonely out here, so if you ever feel like making a social call, Wally and I are just a stone’s throw away. Feel free to stop by, really,” she says, and she pauses, seems to steel her shoulders before lifting her eyes to meet his, “any time of day, or night.”

Will finds that he was correct in his assumption: he reads the proposition in her words, he knows what she is offering.

“Thanks, Molly,” he says. “Maybe I will. Looks like that truck of yours could use some work. Might be fun to get my hands dirty.” His tone is unmistakable, and Molly flushes pink.

“Any time of day, *or* night,” she says again, and then she steps away, seemingly unable to hold his gaze any longer. “Goodnight, Will,” she tells him, and he smiles.

“Goodnight, Molly,” he says, and he watches her turn her back to him and make her way to the truck. He watches her climb in beside her son, and then he is blinded by the beam of her headlights. He gives the two of them a sightless wave of farewell, and then he turns away.

Will makes his way back into his camp alone. He brushes his teeth, he makes his bed. He spreads himself back over the narrow cot, and he asks himself, at last, how much longer he can avoid the thoughts of Doctor Lecter. He imagines he can see them through the roof of his cabin: carrion birds outlined stark black against the white moon, circling endlessly, waiting for their moment of descent. He tries to sleep, but the darkness and the stillness are stifling. He has grown used to light creeping in through the bottom of his hospital door; he has grown used to the sound of the nurses pacing through their rounds, to the constant threat of an opening door preventing him from allowing his mind and body to work in tandem against him. He looks up at the ceiling, sees the shadow of circling carrion birds above him, and he thinks that there is nothing stopping them now.

Now, in the darkness and the stillness of his little cabin, where his solitude is unthreatened and uninterrupted, where the cover of night hides all that his thoughts and body might do, the tide of his desire is irresistible. The carrion birds descend. And, although Will knows he should not do it, although he knows it is a bad idea, he allows himself to slide warm, searching fingers down beneath the fabric of his cotton pants, allows himself to take his length into his hand, allows himself to awaken sensations that have lain in desperate waiting

during two long months at the hospital. He allows himself to imagine Doctor Lecter: the sharp pierce of his teeth and the hot flush of his breath against skin; he allows himself to imagine Doctor's Lecter's long fingers grasping him by his hips, turning him onto his stomach, spreading him open like a piece of ripe fruit and consuming him whole. He allows himself to imagine Doctor Lecter holding him immobilized and powerless, pressing himself inside his body, moving in and over him like a wildfire long since grown out of control. He allows himself to imagine the sounds Doctor Lecter would make, the way he would feel, moving inside him as he comes, and Will finds he can't resist the battering tide of his own desperate longing anymore. He comes, spills over his hand and chest in warm, endless pulses, and he finds to his horror that his lips are forming a name.

"*Hannibal*," they whisper to the impassive, listening ears of the night, "*Hannibal*."

"Was it Good to See Me?"

Chapter Notes

More new tags, yay! We're moving right along.

I had a lot of fun with this chapter since I love pining and drama, but I had even MORE fun with the next chapter. You'll have to wait to see why though ;D.

Thanks as always for the comments and kudos - your feedback helps me work through my moments of sheer panic and self-doubt while I write this story, lol. There's so much great Hannigram fic out there, thanks for including me in your reading list!

H.

Hannibal is angry.

It's been many years since he allowed himself to feel this particular emotion, and he finds it all-encompassing. His anger is sharp, and fierce, and at times it threatens to consume him entirely. His anger is dangerous by nature of its unpredictability, not unlike a piece of cinder being carried by the wind across a parched and scorching desert. Hannibal is full of kindling, kindling that has been drying and tangling for years without a fire to cleanse it, and it is anyone's guess where the cinder might fall. It is anyone's guess when kindling might become inferno.

Hannibal tries to keep himself under control, reminding himself of the years he's spent exercising full autonomy over his emotions. But he has felt irritation, certainly, in the years since leaving Florence, and frustration in no small measure, but anger? Anger is another thing entirely. Anger spreads itself beneath his skin, hovers at the edge of his vision like a veil. Anger feeds him. Anger replenishes him. Anger makes him feel, strangely, more alive.

In the end, Hannibal allows himself to be angry at Will Graham. He allows it because the alternative would be infinitely more dangerous. He allows it because it helps to convince him that Will's chapter in the illuminated manuscript of his life has ended. It helps to convince him that it's time to move on.

He tries to lose himself as he once did in the fabric of his routine: in his duties at the hospital, in the rich earth of his garden, in books and music and dinner parties. He makes love to his wife, makes small talk with his tailor, drinks imported wines and watches the sun set behind

the dun-colored mountains in the distance. And yet, despite his best efforts to the contrary, he can find no pleasure in his routine any more.

With Will Graham gone his life feels hollow, vacuous, cyclical and utterly unbearable. He goes through the motions propelled by some force he cannot see, and he spends his waking hours in the sun-dappled courtyard in his mind, studying Will Graham across the table.

“What is it that you really want, Will?” he asks. “Not the man you pretend to be, but the man you really are?”

But Will Graham does not answer.

Will Graham smirks, Will Graham bares his throat, Will Graham peels an orange and licks the juice from his fingers, but he does not answer. He does not answer because Hannibal cannot parse out the answer for himself, no matter how hard he tries.

It is easy enough for Hannibal to understand what the man Will Graham pretends to be would want with him: a public champion in the face of threats and accusations: nothing terribly compelling there. But Hannibal has caught a hint of soft underbelly; he knows that the man behind Will’s mask must have his own wants, too. But what are they?

Is it simply sex?

Is it the feeling of accomplishment that comes from leading a seemingly upstanding man away from his marital bed?

Is it the joy of shattering a teacup, knowing that it cannot gather itself up again?

Or is it something darker? Something deeper? Something infinitely more tender?

Is it perhaps a listening ear, one with whom to share the truth of that night in the orange grove and other dark nights before it? A listening ear to understand all the things that Will keeps hidden, a listening ear that will accept every part of him: the reckless killer and the soft underbelly alike?

Hannibal, a man who prides himself on his ability to reduce people to easily-decipherable sets of influences, finds Will Graham’s opacity maddening, finds it unspeakably beguiling. And despite the hours he spends in the sun-dappled courtyard in his mind, trying to needle out an answer from the specter of Will Graham that joins him there, his efforts bear no fruit.

He feels adrift, suspended by the ties ands rails of expectations, pivoting from one moment to the next solely through the buzzing hum of machinery he put in place years ago when he felt it was a necessity for his continued survival. He finds that he is always hungry. His anger feeds him, but it is not enough to sate him. His body feels cavernous, his longing for Will Graham like a chasm in the pit of his stomach. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the beast presses its fingers against the walls of its prison, rumbling out its discontent. It is growing increasingly unsatisfied with its penance.

Hannibal does not know what to do.

He tries to tell himself that it is enough, that the life that he has created here is enough. He has spent years cultivating this little world, he tells himself. There is safety here, order and certainty, a guarantee that the near-catastrophes of Florence will never be repeated. He tries to tell himself that it is enough to keep the beast always caged, that it is enough to let only the man in the person suit walk free. But his body seems to disagree with him, for the first time in many years.

His body leads him into Will Graham's old room, searching desperately for a trace of Will Graham's scent. His body leads him out into the rose garden, his body trails fingers over the blooms there and remembers the shape of Will Graham's lips in the golden light of evening. His body leads him to his office, where he locks the door behind him and presses his fists against his eyes. His body makes him fight against the roaring urge to loosen his pants, to bring himself release to the thought of Will Graham. His body taunts him, teases him with thoughts of replacing Will Graham's sly smirks with gasps of want, with thoughts of drowning Will Graham so fully in his own pleasure that he forgets all about the mask he wears.

His body keeps him awake at night, staring up into the darkness while Alana sleeps beside him, and whispers to him of his past life. His body reminds him of what he would have done to Will Graham in that past life, when the beast and the man were one. It reminds him what the Hannibal of Florence would have done, had he been presented with the gift of Will Graham.

The Hannibal of Florence would have taken Will Graham into his bed the very day they met, would have glutted them both on sins of the flesh. He would have bathed Will's skin in scented oils and taken him to dinner, would have fed him *lampredetto* and red wine and acorns, would have watched the sun set over the Arno and invited Will back to their rooms with the promise of things even more beautiful than a Tuscan nightfall.

The Hannibal of Florence would have found an unwitting third to join their happy party, would have watched the man behind Will's mask slowly invite himself out when they led the man back to their rooms. The Hannibal of Florence would have asked the man behind Will's mask if he would like to participate in what was about to happen.

And the Hannibal of Florence would have felt his soul sing, would have marvelled at the feeling of being known, *seen*, for the first time in his life. He would have wept with joy, with something darker, something deeper, something infinitely more tender; he would have cut out his own heart and served it on a platter at the sound of Will Graham saying *yes*.

Hannibal does not know the truth of the man behind Will's mask, but still, he wonders at it. He wonders, and he wants. Endlessly, he wants.

Hannibal is angry.

+++

W.

Will is angry.

He hasn't seen hide nor hair of Doctor Lecter in two weeks, and every day that passes feels a little more endless than the one before it. He tells himself that he should be patient, that it takes time for the seeds of desire to sprout; he tells himself that it takes time for someone who lives their life on the brightly-lit side of the garden to make their hesitant way over to the side of shadows and thorns. But still, after nearly two months of unabashed flirtation and lingering glances, Will finds that he had expected a bit more from the Good Doctor.

After all, Doctor Lecter had been far from opaque in his attentions, and Will had certainly reciprocated in kind. He was under the impression that he'd made his invitation quite clear. So why hasn't Doctor Lecter come to see him?

Is it fidelity to his wife?

Fear of their affair being discovered?

The threat to his reputation?

Lingering uncertainty over the act of fucking another man?

Will doubts it. The Good Doctor hadn't seemed too worried about any of those things during their dinners in the rose garden, dinners he'd spent eyeing Will across the table like he was the long-awaited dessert after a seven-course meal.

So then what could be holding him back? Why would he send such heavy signals, if he never had any intention of acting on them?

Will tries to keep himself busy so that he doesn't drive himself to distraction with these thoughts. He visits Abigail at the orphanage. He does odd jobs around the migrant camp. He works on Molly's truck. He eats dinner with the Fosters every night.

(It is no small source of amusement to him, still, to consider how drastically his dinner companionship has changed since he left Doctor Lecter's hospital, but in truth Will doesn't begrudge the Fosters their company. In fact, it's quite the opposite. He suspects that his time in Doctor Lecter's hospital has had a lasting impact on him. He finds that he doesn't much like eating alone, anymore.)

Will tries hard to restrict his thoughts of Doctor Lecter to the nighttime hours, when he is alone and restless in his little camp by the stream and his hands can't seem to resist submitting to the circling carrion birds of his thoughts. At night, Will's anger gives way to desire, and he thinks of Doctor Lecter a great deal: of all the things that they might do together, of the way that Doctor Lecter might taste, of the way the two of them might cripple Will's small cot with the force of their lovemaking. When he thinks about such things, Will cannot stem the tide of his own pleasure, and he brings himself to a panting release in the

stillness of his little cabin. Afterward, he stares up into the darkness, listening to the babbling of the stream and the susurrus of the nocturnal insects around him, and he wonders if, somewhere across town, in a sprawling house well-lit by electric lamps, next to his "charming wife" who has long since fallen asleep, Doctor Lecter is lying awake and thinking about him, too.

Sometimes Will could swear that, despite the distance between them, he can *feel* Doctor Lecter - can *feel* that they are doing the same thing at the same time. Will will twine his fingers in his blankets, twist his back and curl his toes, and he will feel the specter of Doctor Lecter's body shifting in turn; restless and uneasy. Will will turn onto his side, tracing his fingers across his pillow, and he will see the specter of Doctor Lecter's fingers moving over his own pillow somewhere miles away. Sometimes Will will fall asleep this way, his face pressed against his blankets, and he is certain that, somewhere across town, Doctor Lecter is resting in the same position; he is certain that, were Doctor Lecter there beside him, they would be lying nose-to-nose.

But these thoughts are only for the nighttime hours: for the darkness, when Will is alone and there is no-one to hear him except the impassive, listening ears of the night. In the daylight hours, Will tries not to think of Doctor Lecter.

Will tries not think of Doctor Lecter at all, in the daylight hours, except to think that he will be ready when the Good Doctor finally comes for him.

(And if there is a part of him, a small, sad part of him, that whispers: *What if he doesn't come? What if he never meant to come at all?,* then Will ignores it. Doctor Lecter *will* come to him, he tells himself. The alternative does not bear thinking about.)

Meanwhile, life without Doctor Lecter goes on, and Will must go on with it. Today he is paying another visit to the Verger Family Orphanage, hoping to check in on Abigail. He has realized, in the time since leaving Doctor Lecter's hospital, that being at the orphanage isn't good for Abigail. He has noticed that none of the other kids seem to talk to her, that she seems even more subdued and skittish now than she did in the rose garden. He can't help but notice that she seems, impossibly, even more thin. He fears for her, and his fear sends a curdling sorrow deep into the pit of his stomach. And so he is back again, only four days after his last visit, knocking on the double doors and waiting to be let in.

The woman who answers the door scowls at him, running her eyes from his scuffed, well-worn shoes all the way up to his disheveled, windswept hair, and she sighs. "*You* again?" she asks, and Will gives her his most charming smile.

"It's nice to see you too," he tells her, and he gestures to the door. "I'm here to visit Abigail Hobbs. Mind if I come in?"

"Abigail isn't here anymore," the woman tells him, and Will feels a frisson of unease crawl down his spine.

"Why not?" he asks, and the woman rolls her eyes.

"I'm not allowed to discuss the particulars," she says. "It's Miss Verger's policy."

Will drums his fingers against his pant leg. “Then can I talk to Miss Verger?” he asks, and the woman sighs again.

“I suppose you’ll just keep coming back if I say no,” she says, “so you might as well come in.” She pulls the door wide and moves aside, and Will crosses the threshold. He can hear the shrieking and laughter of children down the hallway, followed by thundering footsteps and the sound of a quiet tumult.

“It’s play time,” the woman tells him, and she leads him down the hallway to a closed door. “This is Miss Verger’s office,” she says, and she gives the surface of the door three firm, ringing knocks. “Miss Verger,” she calls through the polished wood, “you have a visitor.”

There is a long pause before Margot responds. “Who is it?” she asks, and Will clears his throat.

“Ah, hey, Margot, it’s Will Graham,” he calls, and another several moments of silence pass before the door partially opens.

“Come in, Will,” Margot says at last, and the woman who escorted him disappears back down the hallway. Will slides through the gap in the door and inches his way into the room. He realizes immediately that the air feels close and prickly, and he feels his shoulders tighten. He sees a flash of black in his peripheral vision as Margot presses the door shut behind him. “Why don’t you have a seat, Will?” she asks.

Will makes his way to a chair and sits down, his body taut with uncertainty. He listens to the sound of Margot moving behind him. He wants to turn to look at her, but he senses somehow that he shouldn’t.

“Where’s Abigail?” he asks, and Margot clears her throat.

“Abigail had to leave,” she tells him, her voice tight. “She stopped eating again.”

“Why did she stop eating?”

“She says the food here makes her sick.”

“Why don’t you give her different food then?” Will asks, and he hears Margot draw in a breath.

“Why don’t you ask my *brother*?” she snaps, and Will straightens in his seat. He turns to face her, and he sees that her eyes are wet with tears. “Why don’t you ask *him*, Will, and see what *he* has to say about it? But now that I think about it, you probably don’t want to talk to *him*, since his favorite pastime lately seems to be fantasizing about watching someone murder you. I suppose I’ll just sum up the conversation for you, then: you’d say ‘Why don’t you give the kids better food, Mason? God knows you can afford it,’ and he’d say, ‘Because *beggars can’t be choosers*, Will Graham, don’t you know *anything?*’ And that would be that. Because we’re all *beggars* to him, Will, do you understand? You, me, and every fucking kid who has the misfortune to end up here. How’s that for an answer?”

With that, all of Margot's ire seems to dissipate, and she deflates against the edge of her desk, burying her face in her hands.

"Margot," Will says softly, shocked by the outburst, "are you alright?"

Margot's slim shoulders are shaking, her black-clad figure curving in on itself through the force of her sobs. She doesn't respond, so Will rises to stand, slowly, and he sits down beside her on the desk. He doesn't touch her, but he sits close enough that she can reach out for him if she wants to.

"Margot," he says softly, "I'm sorry I made you cry. I didn't mean that you were responsible for Abigail being sick again. Well, I *did*, but I was wrong, and I'm sorry. It's not your fault. None of this is your fault."

Will's words seem to have the opposite of their intended effect. Instead of comforting Margot they only seem to make her cry harder, and Will finds himself at a loss. He feels a tendril of sorrow uncoil deep in the pit of his stomach, feels it writhe against his insides like a wounded dove fluttering its wings.

Poor Margot, he thinks, and his heart breaks for the sad, slender woman sobbing on the desk beside him. *Poor Margot. She really does care about the kids here.*

"Margot, whatever it is you're thinking, stop," he says, and he reaches a hesitant hand to her shoulder. "None of this is your fault. You haven't done anything wrong, and you shouldn't feel like you have."

Margot stiffens at the touch so Will draws away, but when he moves to stand she reaches out and catches his fingers in hers. Her hands are wet with tears and smudged makeup.

"Thank you," she whispers, and Will presses his lips together. He wants to help her, somehow.

"It's hard not to feel powerless sometimes," he says slowly. "The world can be such an awful place, it can be hard to remind yourself why you even bother with living. But you're *not* powerless, Margot. Sometimes the things you can do to make things better won't seem obvious, but they're there. There's no such thing as a hopeless situation."

"Yes there is," she whispers, and Will tightens his grip on her fingers.

"No, there's not," he tells her.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but it's delusional," Margot whispers. "We're trapped, Will. Mason could play us all like puppets and there's nothing we can do about it."

"He may have us trapped, but there's no such thing as a trap you can't escape."

"Are you sure about that?" Margot asks, and Will meets her teary-eyed gaze.

"Yeah," he says, "I am. The most dangerous traps are the ones in your mind, Margot. You feel trapped by Mason and the control he has over your situation. But he can't control

everything, it's impossible. He can't control *you*. He can try to, but even his power has limits. Think about it, Margot: there are ways for you to influence him without him even knowing it. They may not be obvious, but they're there. There are ways you can create situations beyond his control. It won't be easy, but you can do it."

Margot's tears have stopped falling, and her eyes have begun to gleam.

"Why should I take your word for it?" she asks, and Will squeezes her hand again.

"Because we both care about what happens to Abigail," he tells her. "You can pretend you don't, but I know you're lying. And because any negative influence you could have on Mason will up benefiting me in the end."

Margot lets out a throaty huff of a laugh at this, and she wipes her shirt sleeve against her nose. "And here I thought you just wanted to help a damsel in distress, Will Graham," she says, and Will meets her gaze.

"You're not in distress, Margot," he tells her firmly. "Or at least you won't be for much longer. I believe in you."

Margot holds his gaze for a long moment, and Will can see the lines in her makeup where her tears and fingers have wiped it away. The skin beneath it is flushed with life.

"Abigail is at Doctor Lecter's hospital," she tells him. "You should go and visit her there. I'm sure she'd be glad to see you. I'm sure Doctor Lecter would, too."

In spite of himself, Will can't resist the immediate spark of interest at her words.

"Oh, you're just trying to sweet-talk me now, Margot," he says. "After all, what could the *inestimable* Doctor Lecter want with a flea-bitten migrant like me?"

Margot licks her lips. "I think there are a lot of things you and Doctor Lecter could offer each other," she says slowly. "Trust me on this one, Will: I'm taking you at your word, I suggest you take me at mine."

Will rises to stand, and he turns over her words. *Maybe she's right*, he thinks. *Maybe a visit to the Good Doctor would finally be enough to lure him to the dark side of the garden.*

"Thanks, Margot," he says, and he pulls his fingers free from hers. "Regardless, I won't take up any more of your time. Just remember what I said, okay?"

Margot gives him a small smile. "Okay," she says, and she lets out a long breath as Will turns away. "Will," she says after a moment, and Will turns back, seeing her as a long tendril of black against the bright white sunlight pouring in through her office windows. "Thank you. Really. I'm glad you came to see me today."

Will smiles at her. "I'm glad too, Margot," he tells her, and then he opens the door. He needs to get back to his campsite quickly, he thinks, if hopes to arrive at the hospital in time to call on Doctor Lecter.

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H.

Hannibal thinks that perhaps he has stumbled into a daydream when he looks out the window and sees Will Graham sitting in the rose garden.

Will Graham is in the garden again. Will Graham looks, as always, like a vision. Will Graham's scent is wafting through the open window to Hannibal's nose, mingling with the heady odor of the blooms. Will Graham is in the garden again. Will has come back to Hannibal, after all. But why? What is that he wants to say, now, after everything that was left so eloquently unsaid during their last meeting?

For a moment, Hannibal considers simply leaving: he considers turning his back on Will Graham and going home, back to his garden and his palatial house, back to his wife and the sunset over dun-colored mountains. For a moment, Hannibal considers leaving, and making a point to Will Graham about the game he is trying to play.

But, in truth, he knows as soon as the thought occurs that he will never do it. Although the mind may wish to make a point, the body often has other wishes entirely, and Hannibal's body has made itself abundantly clear on the subject of Will Graham. His body leads him out through the doorway into the rose garden with a scarcely-bridled sense of glee. His body is thrilled with Will Graham's unexpected appearance, although his mind remains reticent.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal says, and he sits down in what used to be his regular chair, what now feels like a lifetime ago.

"Hey there, Doctor Lecter," Will says, and his face spreads in a beguiling smile. "How are you?"

Hannibal finds that the initial shock of Will Graham's appearance is fading, that his mind is wresting control back from his body. He finds that he is becoming angry, again; reminded of the lingering sting of betrayal. He finds that he welcomes the feeling.

"I am very well, Will, thank you for asking," he says. "What brings you to the hospital? Are you feeling unwell? If I recall correctly, I advised you when you left that I couldn't attest to the completeness of your recovery."

Will draws a hand to his face, biting the tip of his thumb and studying him with a small smile. "No, Doctor Lecter, I still feel great," he says, "but I appreciate your concern. I actually came to see Abigail Hobbs."

Hannibal lets out a quiet hum at this. He had forgotten about Abigail. In truth, he is displeased. He had wanted to be the only reason for Will to come back.

“I see. Yes, Abigail was readmitted yesterday,” he says. “It is most unfortunate.”

“I figured since I was here anyway, I may as well say hello to my favorite doctor,” Will continues, “see if there’s anything I can do for him.”

Hannibal feels a thrill of anger at his words, at their dripping, sweet juice of invitation.

Wicked, foolish, beautiful Will Graham, he thinks, *you do not know the half of what you’re asking.*

“How thoughtful of you,” he says, all politesse and warm facade. “It is always pleasant to receive a visit from a friend.”

Will Graham is not relenting. He tilts his head, running his eyes over Hannibal’s face. “Is that what we are, Doctor Lecter?” he asks. “Friends?”

Hannibal forces a blank smile. “Certainly, Will,” he says. “You are, and always will be my friend.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Will says. He leans back in his chair and licks his lips. “That means a lot, especially since I don’t think I’ve been a very good friend to you thus far in our acquaintance.”

Hannibal refuses to take the bait. “I disagree, Will,” he says. “I see nothing lacking in your friendship.”

“On the contrary, Doctor Lecter,” Will tells him, “I accidentally took your copy of *The Odyssey* with me when I left, and I’ve had it with me this whole time. That’s not exactly the behavior of a good friend, is it?” he asks, and Hannibal watches him extend the leather-bound book into the space between them.

“I would never begrudge a friend the pleasure of reading,” he says, and Will raises an eyebrow.

“Ah. You’d only begrudge them *other* pleasures, then, I take it,” he says, and Hannibal forces his face to remain still, forces himself to take the book in such a way that ensures their fingers do not touch.

“Did you make it all the way through the poem?” he asks, his voice stiff with formality, and Will nods.

“I did. I have to admit I was… disappointed with the ending. I kind of hoped one of the suitors would kill Odysseus. I wanted to see what would happen.”

Hannibal studies Will across the table: the practiced ease with which he shrugs his shoulders, the delicately rehearsed nonchalance with which he speaks his words, and he decides abruptly to dispense with their mutual charade.

“Of course you did, Will,” he says. “You delight in destruction. That’s why you’re here, after all, isn’t it?”

Will goes very still. He moves his head, slightly, and a line forms between his pretty eyebrows. Hannibal has taken him by surprise, speaking so directly.

“I delight in *disorder*, Doctor Lecter,” he says, slowly, taking his time with the words. “That’s not the same as destruction.”

“Isn’t it?”

“*No*, it isn’t,” Will says, and his voice is sharper now, glinting, no longer with heavy and ripe with the fruit of flirtation.

“Would you care to elaborate on how exactly they are different, Will?” Hannibal asks, and Will’s eyes narrow.

“No, *Doctor Lecter*, I don’t think I would,” he says, and Hannibal sees that his shoulders have grown tense beneath the thin fabric of his cotton shirt.

“Occasionally I drop a teacup to shatter on the floor,” Hannibal says. “On purpose. I'm not satisfied when it doesn't gather itself up again.”

Will Graham’s face curls into a frown, and he presses his pink lips together. “Disorder is the natural state of the universe, Doctor Lecter,” he says, “you can’t avoid it forever.”

Hannibal ignores him. “That is what you do, Will. You shatter things and leave it to others to pick up the pieces. That is what you did to Jack Crawford, and that is what you are trying to do to me. That is not disorder, Will. That is destruction.”

A scarlet flush appears across Will Graham’s cheekbones, and his gleaming eyes narrow. “Are you accusing me of *murder*, Doctor Lecter?” he asks, and Hannibal tightens his fingers around the leatherbound copy of *The Odyssey* .

“Certainly not, Will,” he says, “I am simply pointing out that you have made life exceedingly difficult for Jack Crawford ever since your arrival, and that you don’t seem terribly concerned by that fact.”

Will’s eyes have gone dark, his face shadowed and his body coiled tight as a spring. To another person he would look frightening in this moment, but to Hannibal he is unspeakably beautiful. To Hannibal, Will now looks like the killer he suspects him to be. The sight is intoxicating.

“And you think that’s what I’m trying to do to you, Doc?” he asks. “Make your life difficult? ‘Shatter you like a teacup’?”

Hannibal keeps his face still. “More or less,” he replies.

Will studies Hannibal for several moments until at last he shifts, leaning forward and folding his hands on the surface of the table. He meets Hannibal’s gaze.

“Then perhaps I need to be more *explicit*, Doctor Lecter,” he says, and, despite himself, Hannibal feels a pulse of heat in his gut at the tone. “I would like to extend an invitation for

you to visit me at my campsite. I think we could have very good… conversations, there, and I would very much appreciate the pleasure of your company. Rest assured that any *teacups* would remain unbroken." Will pauses, raises a pretty eyebrow. "Am I making myself understood?" he asks. He speaks the final sentence with exaggerated enunciation, as though addressing it to a child, and Hannibal feels the cinder of his anger smolder.

"I understand you perfectly, Will," Hannibal tells him. "I always have. And in return, I hope that you can understand why such behavior would be wholly inappropriate, given the circumstances. I am a very busy man, and the time I do not spend working ought to be spent with my *wife*, don't you think?" Will's face goes still and blank, but his eyes are hot and heavy on Hannibal's face. "What do you think, Will?" Hannibal continues, finding that he is unable to resist the urge to press the knife a little farther in. "*Am I making myself understood*?"

Silence hangs between them for several moments, thick and cloying and acidic, until Will rises to stand abruptly.

"Clear as crystal, Doc," he says, and he taps his finger against the leatherbound book on the table between them. "Glad I got this back to you, but I won't take up any more of your time. Have a good evening, Doctor Lecter."

And, just like that, it seems, Will Graham is leaving him again.

Hannibal tries to regain his bearings. He tries to remind himself that this is what he wants, but the sight of Will Graham's back makes his anger seem such a frivolous, temporary thing compared to the black, hungry void that is opening up inside his chest. It makes the sting of betrayal such a faint sensation compared to the sound of a bell that is starting to ring in the space behind his right ear.

Despite the fact that he is angry, despite the fact that he knows Will Graham is a liar and that any reason Will Graham has for leading him into his bed is certainly for no-one's benefit but his own, the sight of Will Graham's back sends currents of desperate electricity sparking beneath Hannibal's skin. He finds that he can't prevent himself from calling out.

"Will," he says, and Will pauses, turning his head just enough to show that he is listening.

"Was it good to see me?" Hannibal asks, and although Will turns to face him fully, his eyes are flat and guarded.

In all the ways that matter, Hannibal thinks, *Will Graham is already gone*.

"*Good*?" Will says, and he shakes his head. "No, it wasn't. Goodbye, Doctor Lecter."

A Cinder Alights

Chapter Notes

Smut tags?! Whaaat? Who put those there?!

I'm kidding, obviously. Yeah, cat's out of the bag on that one lol: we've reached the smut stage. Just as a heads up though, this doesn't mean things are going to be golden and happy for Hannibal and Will from here on out. Remember way back in Chapter 4 when Alana was like "Ummm, sex is not a proper substitute for actually communicating with each other, Hannibal"? That was foreshadowing.

I am both excited and nervous to post this chapter, because while I've known it was coming all along, I also acknowledge that it's kind of a LOT, and that while some of you are reading it you might be like "!!!!!!!", lol. Maybe not, though! We'll see I guess :). I would love to hear your thoughts!

Thanks as always for reading <3.

W.

Will leaves the rose garden while the sun is setting, guiding his feet down the paved road away from the hospital and charting a course for the dun-colored mountains in the distance. He keeps walking, and walking, and walking, because he doesn't know what else to do; because he doesn't want to consider what he might end up doing if he stops.

As he walks, he tells himself that he is not angry. As he walks, he tells himself that he is not devastated. As he walks, he tells himself that he is glad to be closing the door on Hannibal Lecter once and for all.

Will tells himself that his entire stay in Redlands has been little more than a reminder of the value of lessons learned the hard way. All those evenings in the rose garden, he tells himself, all those evenings spent smiling at Doctor Lecter through golden sunlight and the hovering odor of the blooms: *that* was all a dream. *This* is reality, Will tells himself. *This* is what is real for him, what will *always* be real for him: the darkening road spread out before him, the pressing weight of his isolation, and the quiet, curdling knowledge that he could not have been a bigger fool, even if he'd tried.

All of this is laughable, Will thinks, *every single part of this detestable farce of a situation*.

He had truly believed that he had Doctor Lecter seduced: he had truly believed that he was playing the Good Doctor like a marionette. But in reality, Will now understands, he'd had it backwards all along. In reality, *Will* was the marionette, and Doctor Lecter had been plucking his strings with all the skill of a concert harpist. Will hadn't seen the strings, he hadn't felt them embed themselves beneath his skin; in fact, he'd never even known that they were there. And meanwhile, all those months in the rose garden, the Good Doctor had been playing Will like a finely-tuned instrument. Doctor Lecter had played with Will the way a fat house-cat plays with a mangy dormouse: not out of any real hunger, but out of boredom. Out of *curiosity*.

The realization makes Will's gut shrivel like a raisin, makes him want to hide his face in some dark corner and vomit out his insides. It's not only the knowledge that his plan has failed him so spectacularly that pains him, it's the knowledge that he let himself be led. The knowledge that he let himself *want*. The knowledge that a part of him is *still* wanting.

As he walks, Will reflects on the perilousness of living the rest of his life still harboring the part of himself that was willing and desperate to open his arms to the vision of Doctor Lecter emerging like a constellation from the darkness in his dreams. That part of him is still there, Will knows. That part of him is still taut and threadbare and wanting. He knows that it will not go away, and he considers what he has to do to free himself from it at last. He thinks that perhaps the simplest thing to do would be to find a sharp knife and to cut it away like string, to pull it up by the roots like an unwelcome weed in a rose garden. *Perhaps that's what I'll do*, he thinks. It certainly wouldn't be the first time Will has amputated a part of himself. He's lived through it before, he thinks, he'll live through it again. And as he cuts, he can remind himself of the many lessons he has learned from the inestimable Doctor Lecter.

Lesson one: what was it that Doctor Lecter said? That Will "shatters things and leaves it to others to pick up the pieces"?

That seems like a good place to start, Will thinks. *That seems like a pretty good lesson.*

When Doctor Lecter spoke those words they felt like needles pricking at the back of Will's throat, and they *still* hurt, even now, hours later, and not the least of all because Will knows that they are true. They hurt because they force Will to remind himself of the way things truly stand between himself and Doctor Lecter. They force Will to remind himself that *he* is penniless, ragged, and worthless, while Doctor Lecter is wealthy, much-admired, and peerless. That *he* is alone and will always be alone, while Doctor Lecter has all the companionship he needs. That *he* is a tangled bed of shadows and thorns, while Doctor Lecter is a well-tended garden full of brightly-lit pathways.

Lesson learned, he thinks. (And what a tangled, thorny lesson it has been.)

In the days that follow their disastrous conversation in the rose garden, Will reflects on the sheer folly that led him to believe he could meet Doctor Lecter on even ground. He had been so *certain* he had everything under control, so *certain* he could make Doctor Lecter fall into his trap. He realizes, now, how naive that was. He realizes, now, that he should have left town weeks ago. He should have left Redlands behind him as soon as he felt well enough to travel.

Sure, Mason Verger might send his cronies after him, Mason Verger might try to flush him out of his hiding place like a pig rooting for truffles in the dirt, but Will has defended himself against such onslaughts before. Will is intimately familiar with what it's like to live his life knowing that every second spent is borrowed time. He knows how to sleep with one eye open and a knife under his pillow. He knows what it's like to live while being hunted.

So why had he let himself stay here so long? Why had he let himself grow so content and so complacent? Why had he ever believed that Doctor Lecter would be his one-way ticket to immunity?

In truth, Will knows the answer to these questions, although he does not want to acknowledge it. In truth, the man behind Will's mask had his own reasons for staying, reasons that had everything to do with Doctor Lecter and nothing at all to do with Mason Verger. Unfortunately, the desires of the man behind Will's mask often do not align with reality, and they have an unfailing tendency to lead Will inevitably to heartbreak and disappointment. As a matter of fact, Will thinks, all of this feels harrowingly familiar, and he reminds himself again that this is why he does not listen to the wants of the man behind his mask anymore.

Will tells himself that he will leave on Saturday morning, that he will pay one last visit to Doctor Lecter's hospital to say goodbye to Abigail (and if his heart gives a brittle pang at the thought of leaving her behind, of abandoning her to the particularly unique variety of tragedy that is her little life, he ignores it), and he dedicates Friday to preparing himself to depart. He spends the morning packing up his campsite, and he heads to the migrant camp before lunchtime. He wants to take another look at Molly's truck before he goes, give it one last check to ensure it's in perfect working order after the many hours he's spent tending to it. Molly greets his arrival with a smile, and Will feels a hot flash of guilt at the sight of it. He has no intention of telling her or her son of his impending departure. (Will has always preferred sins of omission to outright lies.) They share a meal of tinned-meat sandwiches and canned peaches, and after Will's arms have grown weary from baseball practice with Wally he spreads himself on his back in the dirt and wriggles his way beneath Molly's truck. He wants to check the suspension, to ensure the framework of the vehicle is safe to bear the precious weight of the little family inside of it, and it is with this thought in his mind and a flashlight in his hand that Will's last day in Redlands is brutally interrupted.

He hears the shouting first: Molly's neighbors calling out in code that police officers have entered the camp. He doesn't think much of it, at first; after all, the police are in and out of the migrant camp all the time, loping around like wolves stalking a flock of sheep. Nothing out of the ordinary there. He goes back to focusing on his work, goes back to suspension and the adequate bearing of weight, until he hears the sound of crunching gravel draw closer. Then, at last, he pauses, and he hears Molly cry out.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asks, and her voice is immediately followed by the booming rumble of Sheriff Crawford.

"Ma'am, this is a police investigation," he tells her, "I'm going to ask you not to obstruct justice, otherwise we'll have to take you into custody too."

Will feels like his stomach has been filled with ice water, and he grows still beneath the truck.

“Take me into custody?!” Molly repeats, her voice high and slightly frantic. “But I haven’t done anything! *None* of us have done anything! You people can’t just keep barging in here at all hours of the day and night for no reason! We have *rights*!”

Will feels it, then: the static of charge of electricity, the certainty that he is in danger. His entire body tenses, readying itself to fight, and he moves to slide out from underneath the belly of the truck until his movement is thwarted by the grip of two large hands around his ankles. He goes still, and a moment later he is yanked unceremoniously out into the sun. He catches a brief glimpse of Molly and Wally, their mouths open and their eyes bright with fear, before he is forced onto his stomach and pinned down in the dirt. Behind his back, he can feel the sharp, cold bite of handcuffs tightening around his wrists, but he doesn’t even try to resist. He knows that any form of resistance right now would be a bad idea.

“We’re taking you into custody, Will Graham,” the Righteous Sheriff booms from somewhere above him. “You’re being detained for questioning regarding the murder of Emilio Russo in the Verger Orange Groves at oh four hundred hours this morning.”

Another murder? Will thinks. *How*? he wonders. *Who*?

Will had been asleep at that time - or, at least, he had been trying to sleep: more likely he had been staring up into the darkness in his small cabin, studying the shadows of circling carrion birds and wondering at his own hubris. Regardless, he certainly hadn’t been murdering Emilio Russo in the Verger Orange Groves at 0400 that morning.

Which begs the question, then: *who did*?

But then, Will thinks, the fact that he is innocent probably doesn’t even bear mentioning to Sheriff Crawford, nor to the police officer who is currently shoving Will’s face into the dirt. *After all*, Will thinks, choking around a mouthful of gravel and gasping at the heavy weight of a booted foot pressing hard against his back, *nothing I say for the next few hours is ever going to be heard.*

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H.

It has been a stifling, hot, and miserable day at the hospital, and Hannibal is glad that it is over. Since his most recent (and, a detested voice within his mind tells him, most likely *final*) conversation with Will Graham, Hannibal finds that the only thing he enjoys at all anymore is time spent in the courtyard in his mind. In the courtyard in his mind, Hannibal and Will are never at odds with one another. They do not argue. They do not come together under false pretenses. They do not lie to each other. Often times they do not even speak, content instead

to simply sit in companionable silence, smiling at each other in the sunlight. Hannibal would spend entire days in the courtyard in his mind, if he could.

However, with Will Graham gone, Hannibal's *real* life has reasserted its hold over him with staggering force. Hannibal's *real* life, the life he hardly recognizes anymore, forces him to stay busy, forces him to limit his trips to the courtyard in his mind to the evening hours. It is not until the sun has set, not until Hannibal has suffered through an endless day at the hospital and a tedious dinner with his wife, that he is able to escape at last to the paradise he created. After dinner, Hannibal seeks the silence of his kitchen garden, and while his hands turn rich soil his mind transports him to a world of bougainvillea and blue skies. His mind transports him to a world where Will Graham is still speaking to him, where Will Graham asks him if it would really be such a bad thing to shatter a few teacups, now and then.

After all, the Will in his mind reminds him, his voice dripping with the juice of invitation, *the most beautiful teacup in the world is useless if you don't even want to drink from it*.

And it is with this thought in his mind, with this consideration of teacups and the temptations of disorder, that Hannibal is packing his briefcase and preparing to leave for the day when he's interrupted by the sound of a knock on his door. There is a small flame of hope in his chest that he will look up to find Will Graham standing in his doorway, but that flame is quickly doused. It is not Will Graham standing in the doorway; instead, it is a police officer - young, still wet around the gills, with curly red hair and a nervous expression.

"Good evening, Officer," Hannibal says, "how may I help you?

The police officer thumbs nervously at his belt, and he clears his throat. "Are you Doctor Lecter?" he asks, and Hannibal nods.

"I am," he confirms. The young officer draws in a breath, and Hannibal feels his shoulders grow tense at the sound.

"Sheriff Crawford asked me to escort you to the police station," the officer tells him, and Hannibal stiffens.

"Escort me to the police station?" he repeats. He forces an amiable smile, a jest, despite his rising sense of unease. "Am I under arrest?"

The young officer blanches, his face pale and his eyes wide. "God, no, of course not Doctor Lecter!" he blurts. He looks truly panicked by the suggestion. "I wasn't supposed to tell you," he says, "but it's about a man named Will Graham."

Hannibal feels his body grow preternaturally still. The air seems to take on a sharp, crackling quality around him. He can pick out every detail of the young man standing in his doorway, down to the pieces of lint clinging to his uniform. He hears a now-familiar ringing in the space behind his right ear.

"Will Graham?" he repeats. "What about him?"

The young officer looks petrified, and his reply comes out as a stutter. “I’m sorry, sir, I’m not supposed to tell you. Sheriff Crawford will explain everything when you’re at the police station.”

Hannibal tries to keep his movements in check, nodding as he gathers up the papers spread across his desk. “In that case,” he says, “I suppose we should be on our way as soon as possible.”

The drive to the police station feels endless. Hannibal tries to sort through the roiling mass of sensations flinging themselves against the seams of his person suit: anger, alarm, dismay, and, perhaps most discomfiting of all: powerlessness.

Hannibal is not well-suited to feelings of powerlessness. Hannibal has not been well-suited to feelings of powerlessness since the day he lost his family, a day that he does not often let himself think about. He finds that he is thinking about it now.

When he finally arrives at the police station, Hannibal is greeted by a host of smiling faces. Everyone here knows him, everyone here knows that he is a prestigious figure in the community, and they nearly fall over their own feet offering to escort him to the detention center. Hannibal wants to swat them all away like flies, like the irritating pests they are, but instead he forces a smile, and he allows himself to be led. Jack Crawford is waiting for him outside of an interrogation room, and Hannibal takes a moment to glance through the window in the door to see what is inside. He is met with the sight of Will Graham, slumped over a table and bound by handcuffs to a metal ring. There is a burly police officer standing behind him, his arms folded across his chest, and Hannibal sees that Will’s clothing is torn and his pale skin is mottled with bruises.

Then, something strange happens to Hannibal. Then, something starts to spread beneath his skin, something thick and black as tar. He feels the winds pick up over the deserts in his mind, carrying the cinder of his anger aloft. The ringing in the space behind his right ear grows louder.

“Good evening, Doctor Lecter,” Jack greets, and Hannibal finds that he lacks the capacity for social graces.

“What’s going on, Jack?” he asks, and Jack lets out a long breath.

“Well, Hannibal, you may not have heard, but there was another murder in the Verger Orange Groves this morning,” he says. “We brought Will in for questioning while we looked for evidence.”

Hannibal glances through the window at Will’s slumped form, at the dried blood on his bound wrists and his pale skin livid with bruises.

“It must have been a very *thorough* questioning, Jack,” he says, and Jack at least has the decency to grimace.

“Some of my officers are admittedly more… hands-on than others,” he admits, and Hannibal feels his lips curl, feels the beast in his mind press searching fingers against the bars of its

cage. “Look, Hannibal, I’ll be honest with you,” Jack continues, “we’ve had him here for six hours and haven’t been able to find anything. We can’t keep him here any longer, but we can’t exactly let him loose on the street looking like that, either. I don’t want to cause a panic. People are already worked up about the murder, we don’t need Will Graham adding fuel to the fire.”

“And so you sent someone to bring *me* here,” Hannibal states.

“Yes, I did,” Jack says, and he rubs his big hands together. “I was hoping you could escort Will back to wherever he’s staying, convince him not to make a scene. I know he spent some time in your hospital, I thought maybe he’d trust you.”

The ringing in the space behind Hannibal’s right ear has grown shrill.

“Convince him not to make a scene?” Hannibal repeats, and Jack nods.

“I figured it was worth a try,” he says. “I’d like to avoid any mass hysteria.”

Hannibal finds that he has nothing to say to this, nothing at all, and so he merely nods. Jack’s shoulders relax.

“Thank you, Hannibal,” he says. “I knew you’d come through for me.”

And then he opens the door to the interrogation room, and Hannibal follows him inside as if propelled by some force he cannot see. Will looks up at their approach and he gives them both a twisted, leering smile.

“Hey there, Doctor Lecter,” he says cheerfully. “Fancy seeing you here!”

The police officer standing behind Will lifts a meaty hand and slams it against the side of Will’s head. “Don’t talk,” he grunts.

Sheriff Crawford is saying something, but Hannibal finds he cannot hear him. Hannibal is staring at the burly police officer and feeling the tar black sludge beneath his skin spread out through all his veins and capillaries. Hannibal is feeling the beast press its fingers against the bars of its cage, whispering to him of things he should not do.

“Don’t do that,” Hannibal says, but the police officer ignores him.

“Isn’t that right, Hannibal?” Jack asks, and Hannibal looks at him. He has no idea what was previously said.

“Seriously? You called the *Good Doctor Lecter* to take me back to my camp?” Will interjects with a laugh. His voice is strained, and slightly manic. “Great. That’s just great, Jack. Great plan. So then I guess I should expect to see you again soon then, right? Next time anyone commits a crime within a fifty mile radius, perhaps?”

Hannibal watches as the burly police officer’s eyes narrow, watches as he reaches out his meaty fingers and twines them through Will’s dark curls. Hannibal watches as the burly

police officer tightens his disgusting hands around Will's skull, watches as he pulls Will's head back and slams his face into the table with a grunt.

And then, something happens.

Then, somewhere in the far reaches of Hannibal's mind, a cinder alights on the dried-out shell of a Joshua tree, covered now in tar-black sludge. And then, a flame erupts, and the next moments seem to pass without clear distinction, lost in a haze of smoke.

One moment Will is drawing his head back up, his lips red with blood and his eyes unfocused, and the next moment Hannibal has the burly police officer pinned against the wall on the opposite side of the room, the man's arms wrenched behind his back and his entire repulsive body quaking with fear.

"That man is innocent until proven guilty," Hannibal tells him, trying to regain control of himself, trying to breathe through the smoke in his mind. "Perhaps you should consider that next time you feel the urge to strike him."

The officer stutters out an apology, and Hannibal releases him with a smooth movement. He turns to face Jack Crawford, who is staring at him with wide eyes and a very still face. He can barely hear his own voice through the ringing in the space behind his right ear.

"Jack," he says, "would you be so kind as to release Will from his handcuffs?"

Jack does so, and once Will's wrists are free he draws them to his chest gently, his eyes still unfocused. He seems to hold himself tenderly to minimize movement, and he rises to an unsteady stand.

"This isn't necessary, Doc," he slurs, his voice thick through the blood in his mouth. "I can just walk back. Or hitch a ride. Really, you don't need to be here."

Next to him, Jack Crawford clears his throat. "Thanks for your help with this, Hannibal," he says, ignoring Will completely, "*and* for your discretion."

Hannibal watches Will take an unsteady step away from the table, watches him stumble, slightly, and catch himself against the wall. Hannibal watches, and he tries to tamp down the flames of his anger. He tries not to listen to the beast as it whispers through the bars of its cage, telling him to snap that burly police officer's neck with his bare hands, telling him to handcuff that man's corpse to the interrogation table and force Jack Crawford to watch while he cuts off its head.

Hannibal has never been so angry. Everywhere he looks, the room is bathed in red.

"No thanks are necessary, Jack," Hannibal hears himself say. His voice sounds very far away. "It is always my pleasure to help a friend."

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W.

The drive back to Will's campsite is silent. Doctor Lecter hasn't spoken since they left the police station, and even then it was just to open up the passenger door of his expensive car and issue a quiet command for Will to get inside. Up to that point, Will had had every intention of limping back to his campsite with at least the tattered shreds of his dignity intact, but something in the doctor's voice changed his mind.

The air between them is thick and stifling. Will has never been in Doctor Lecter's car before, and he spends most of the drive staring at his hands where they're folded in his lap, trying not to move too much for fear of smearing dirt and dried blood on the immaculate leather seat. The doctor has both hands gripped tight around the steering wheel, and he seems to know the way to Will's camp without being told.

Guess he found my note after all, Will thinks, and he spares a moment to wonder what went through the doctor's head when he found the hand-drawn map tucked away in his leatherbound copy of *The Odyssey*. Will would wonder at this, at the fact that Doctor Lecter seems to have memorized the map even after he so firmly rejected Will's invitation, but Will finds that he's lost the capacity to think clearly about anything. In truth, Will finds that he's lost the capacity to do anything in these moments except sit in silence and wonder what is going to happen.

When they finally arrive at Will's camp, Will opens his car door and tries to figure out how to take his leave from Doctor Lecter with any small measure of dignity. He has only just begun to accept that this is likely an impossible task when he realizes that Doctor Lecter isn't actually leaving: when he realizes that Doctor Lecter is turning the car off and opening his own door. Will tries to understand why this would be, and he climbs out of the car on unsteady legs. Across from him, Doctor Lecter gets out, removing a small bag from behind his seat and shutting the driver's side door with a slam. The sound is jarring in the stillness of the night, and Will feels his spine stiffen at the force behind it. He shuts his own door quietly, and he stares at Doctor Lecter.

The Good Doctor is as beautiful as he has ever been, if not more: tall, statuesque, all golden skin and long limbs, alluring and remote as a constellation. Will thinks, suddenly, of Cassiopeia, and he finds that he wants to apologize to the Good Doctor for the part he played in their argument. He finds that he wants to confess to the Good Doctor that he's missed him terribly, and that scarcely a moment has passed since their last conversation that Will hasn't spent thinking about him. Will finds that he is tired, and that he is hurting, and that he wants more things than he can comprehend. He finds that there are tendrils of longing uncurling from the tips of his toes all the way up into his hair, and he thinks that they must keep going even then, threading their way up through the top of his skull and out into the night sky towards the heavens. He doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know what to do.

"Shall we go inside, Will?" Doctor Lecter asks, and Will forces himself to nod, forces himself to make his way to the back of his truck. He forces himself to pull open the door to

his tiny cabin and step inside, forces himself not to shudder when Doctor Lecter follows him. He forces himself not to think about the poverty of his surroundings, forces himself not to wonder what all of this must look like to the Good Doctor. He lights a gas lamp on the small table and sits down on the edge of his bed with a grimace. It hurts too much to stay upright. Doctor Lecter remains standing, his head nearly touching the roof of the cabin, and he casts a glance to the oil lamp. “Is that safe?” he asks, and Will swallows again.

“Probably not,” he grits out. His voice sounds like gravel. Doctor Lecter stays silent, running his eyes over Will’s face until he sets the bag on the table. Only then does Will realizes that it’s full of medical supplies. Doctor Lecter comes to stand before him, and he holds his hand in front of Will’s face.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” he asks, and Will blinks.

“Two,” he says, and Hannibal hums, dropping his hand back to his side.

“What time is it?”

“Some time after eight, I think.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in Redlands, California.”

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Will Graham.”

Doctor Lecter nods, seemingly satisfied, and then he reaches into his bag. “Remove your shirt, please,” he says, and Will feels his mouth fall open.

“My shirt?” he asks, his voice faint, and Doctor Lecter glances at him, short and sharp.

“I need to see to your injuries,” he chides, and Will straightens.

“Oh,” he murmurs, and then he reaches clumsy fingers to his buttons. “Oh. Yeah, sure.”

“Is there any water?” Doctor Lecter asks, and Will gestures to the bucket in the corner.

“In there,” he says, and he watches the Good Doctor withdraw a porcelain bowl from Will’s small collection and fill it with water. Will removes his shirt. He can feel his heartbeat thudding in his throat, and he finds that he can’t look at his own body; he finds that he can’t look at anything, anything at all, and so he closes his eyes instead.

The doctor moves his fingers over Will’s torso, the motions detached and clinical, but the combination of pain and arousal caused by his touch lights little fires under Will’s skin, making him feel like he is burning from the inside out.

“This isn’t necessary, Doc,” he hears himself say. “I’ve dealt with worse than this before, you can go ho-”

“Be quiet, Will,” Doctor Lecter says, and Will feels a thrill course up his spine. He closes his mouth.

Doctor Lecter pours a glass of water and Will drains it in three large swallows, watching as the Good Doctor takes it back and sets it down on the table in a tight, controlled movement. Will wonders if the doctor notices that the air is filling up with smoke around them; he wonders if Doctor Lecter can feel the flames that are licking at the bottoms of their legs.

“Tilt your head back,” Doctor Lecter says, and Will does so. He can’t look away from the doctor’s face; he can barely make out his features in the dim light, but he keeps trying, desperate for a clue as to what he might be thinking.

The Good Doctor is backlit against the gas lamp on the table and he seems to be glowing at the edges, like some sort of angel in a stained glass window. Will has never noticed the doctor’s smell before - has never been close enough to do so - but he notices it now, clean and minty but tinged with something darker, something deeper. Will supposes that must be his sweat - his human side, coming through despite all his efforts to the contrary. Will realizes that he wants to touch Doctor Lecter, that he wants to touch him desperately, that he wants to touch him so much it’s making his hands shake, making his thoughts hazy and his body so sensitive to touch that he fears he might be melting.

He remembers how powerful Doctor Lecter had looked in the interrogation room, tossing that massive police officer against the wall and holding him there as easily as if he’d been made of nothing but gauze and tin-foil. Will remembers how utterly unexpected it was: that sudden burst of violence from a man who sometimes seems more marionette than human. He thinks of how unprecedented it was, that someone would come to his defense, that someone should *care* enough about him to come to his defense. He thinks how unexpected it was that *Doctor Lecter* would come to his defense, that *Doctor Lecter* should care enough about him to come to his defense. How validating. How intoxicating.

Will finds that he wants to touch Doctor Lecter not because he *needs* to, not because it’s part of some plan meant to secure his freedom, but simply because he *wants* to. Because he wants to make the other man feel good.

“Doctor Lecter,” he says, his voice wavering, “thank you.”

The Good Doctor dips a rag into the bowl of water and begins to wipe at the blood on Will’s face. “No thanks are necessary,” he says.

The doctor dips the rag into the bowl of water again, but this time he presses it gently against Will’s split lip, the movement sending sharp needles of pleasure down Will’s spine. Will feels like a skein of yarn unspooling, like soon there will be nothing left of him at all except for a pile of tangled string at Doctor Lecter’s feet. The darkness of the night seems to be closing in around them, wrapping them both in shadow and heat.

“*Hannibal*,” Will says, his voice barely a whisper, and the doctor goes still. He draws his hand back and begins to move away, but he stops when Will reaches out and catches his hips with his fingers. “Hannibal,” he says again, and the man lets out a tight breath when Will moves his fingers to the buttons of his shirt. Will feels drunk, like his head is filled with

smoke. The flames around them have grown, have nearly reached Will's knees. He can barely control his fingers in their movements, unclasping buttons and tugging fabric away from where it's tucked into trousers, and he doesn't breathe again until his hands are spread over a long expanse of golden skin.

"*Hannibal*," he says again, and he presses his palm against the treasure he's found, feels the flesh and the firmness beneath it, feels the overwhelming heat of it. Will knows that he should stop; Will knows that he should regain control of himself, but he can't seem to gather up the thread of his thoughts. He presses his lips to Hannibal's stomach, to the soft skin just above his belly button, and he hears the man let out a tight breath above him. Hannibal is utterly still, his entire body held immobile, but he makes no move to stop Will when his fingers crawl to his belt buckle, and then to the button of his trousers.

Will can feel Hannibal's erection beneath the fabric, can feel the bulk and heat of it, so stiff that it is likely painful. He draws it out slowly, carefully, studying the length of it, the heavy girth, and he feels his mouth water in preparation before his mind has even caught up to what it is he plans to do. Hannibal has stopped breathing now, has dropped the rag to the floor, and he is holding his hands in tight fists at his sides. Will licks his lips, hovering them over Hannibal's hot length, and he gives the man a moment to tell him to stop, to tell him to cease with this madness. Instead, Hannibal lets out a breath above him, and his voice is tight when he whispers, "Keep going." And that is all the permission Will needs to lean forward and take Hannibal's cock into his mouth.

Hannibal lets out a quiet groan, then, and finally he moves, threading his hands through Will's hair and tightening his long fingers around Will's skull. Will closes his eyes and focuses on the feeling of his lips spreading, on the taste of hot skin against his tongue. He focuses on the sharp, pleasant sting from the reopening of his split lit, and he focuses on the way his mouth aches at the stretch of accommodating Hannibal's size. He explores, at first, using lips and tongue to map the geography of Hannibal's pleasure, the areas that make him hiss, the areas that make his fingers tighten, and then he begins to bring a rhythm to his movements, using his hand and his mouth in tandem, working Hannibal until the man has grown tense all over, until his whole body has pulled taut like a bowstring.

"*Will*," he says at last, the first word he's spoken in what seems like years, "*Will*."

Will hums at the sound and then Hannibal comes, spilling into his mouth in steady pulses, spreading fire down Will's throat all the way into his torso. Will relaxes, allowing himself to take that heat into his body without resistance, and he thinks of fire-eaters in traveling carnivals, of men who walk through flames and come out on the other side unburned. And then he moves his hands to Hannibal's sides, and he guides him down onto the bed beside him.

"*Hannibal*," he says again, the only word he seems to remember how to say, and soon both of them are naked, and the doctor is spread long and bare beneath him like an offering. He is even more beautiful than Will had imagined, all long limbs and golden skin, broad shoulders and soft belly. Will wants him so badly that he finds it hard to look at him.

There is Vaseline stored under the mattress, hidden there for just such an occasion, but Will finds that he can hardly remember the logic that led to those preparations, now; Will finds

that he can think only in terms of the flames that are spreading upward and consuming his small mattress as he coats his fingers with the lubricant. Will finds that he can think only in terms of the flames that are enveloping them both in a hungry embrace as he presses his fingers against Hannibal's entrance, easing them inward and spreading them outward until Hannibal groans. Will's whole body is shaking, and when he reaches a slick hand down to coat himself with Vaseline he can't resist the curse that falls out of his mouth. He hears Hannibal let out a tight breath beneath him.

"*Will*," he says, and he pulls Will down between his legs, spreading his long limbs wider and angling his hips up. Will draws in a breath that is mostly smoke and lines himself up, pressing his cock against Hannibal's entrance. He thinks that it's likely been years since Hannibal has done this, if he's ever done it at all, so he tries to go slow, at first, gentle and easy, sliding himself past the tight ring of muscle and ignoring the roaring urge to move faster, to press harder into that welcoming heat. He stays that way, moving in slow, gentle thrusts, keeping himself in check, until Hannibal groans in resistance, until Hannibal wraps Will's hips in his long fingers and pulls him hard and sharp into his body. And then, Will lets himself go. And then, Will lets the flames overtake him, lets his movements be cataclysmic, like the collision of tectonic plates creating cracks in the surface of the very earth. He lets his movements be monumental, lets them feed the inferno they've created between their two bodies.

"*Hannibal*," he says again, and the man releases a hand from Will's hips, crawls it through the flames and slides his long fingers into Will's. He draws their joined hands to his mouth, kisses them, and when Will comes they are palm-to-palm, their eyes locked through heat so overwhelming as to be nearly blinding.

When it is over, when Will has given Hannibal as much of himself as he possibly can offer beyond giving him his life, he opens his eyes and meets Hannibal's gaze. He feels like his skin is gone, replaced with something infinitely more delicate, infinitely more tender. He holds Hannibal's gaze as his body grows still and the man gives him a smile, cupping his face in his big hands and kissing his mouth. It's the first time anyone has kissed Will in years, and he feels it spread through his body like a healing balm, covering his newly-exposed flesh in fresh, cool water.

Will feels something like love bubble up in his throat, sharp and effervescent, and he wonders for the first time if all of this has been a bad idea.

Grappling for Closeness

Chapter Notes

In this chapter, we have: a time skip, the beginnings of angst, Margot being awesome, and a glimpse of the elusive man behind Will's mask! All this, and more! Stay tuned!

Thanks so much as always for reading :)!! I love to hear your thoughts.

THREE MONTHS LATER

H.

Hannibal has learned that it is best to be cautious when it comes to Will Graham. He has learned that it is better to draw back when he wants to press further, that it is better to bind when he wants to uncoil.

He had known from the beginning that a physical relationship with Will would be a mistake. He had known from those first sly smirks in the rose garden that Will had the capacity to threaten everything he's built here in Redlands, but it was not until that first night in Will's campsite, not until Will put his hands on Hannibal's body and made the beast inside him purr with glee, that Hannibal truly understood the depths of danger Will presents to him.

He told himself to leave the moment he felt those hands settle on his skin, to turn his back on Will Graham and his multitude temptations and retreat back to the safety of his routine, back to the safety of order and certainty. And yet Will's touch had bound him to the spot, had made him powerless against the deafening roar of his own desires. He could no more have walked away from Will in that moment than he could have cut out his own heart and roasted it over an open flame. He suspects that both experiences would have been similarly painful for him.

And so, he stayed. And so, he let Will touch him, he let Will remind him of his body's own capacity for pleasure. Hannibal had felt too big for his skin, in those moments: he had feared that the borders of his mortal coil could not possibly be enough to contain the tide of sensations rising within him. Making love to Will was so far removed from the experiences of his marital bed as to seem like another act entirely. He emerged from it feeling wrung-dry, as though he had run the distance from Redlands to Florence, his legs threatening to give out beneath him at any moment, and yet still he wanted to keep going. He had reached for Will in the moments afterward, when Will descended from the peak of his pleasure and the two of them lay panting and tangled. He had reached for Will, hoping to convey to him something

he could not define (even now, Hannibal does not know exactly what it was), hoping to reassure himself at least that all of this was not just some fragment of a dream. And yet, nearly as soon as he reached for Will, he found that Will was pulling himself away. He found that Will was hiding himself behind a thick stone wall, impenetrable even to the man whose body he'd just swum up like a river. All too soon, reality reasserted itself with a vengeance, and Hannibal and Will Graham were near-strangers once more. Only then did Hannibal begin to consider the repercussions of his actions: his unprecedented attack on the police officer, his blind descent into bed with Will Graham, the fires of anger still smoldering in the distance of his mind. Only then did Hannibal realize what he had just done, and what he just might end up doing if he did not learn to be more careful.

And so Hannibal has learned, over months spent coiled in bed with Will Graham, drunk with lust and nearly blind with the aching of his hunger, that it is far too dangerous a thing to let his wanting for this man roam free. He has learned to curb it: to keep it in check, even when his pleasure threatens to consume him entirely. He wants to give all of himself to Will, but he doesn't. He wants to cut away Will's mask at the seams; he wants to reveal the man who is hiding behind it. He wants to *possess* Will: to cherish him, to adore him, to keep him by his side for all his days. He wants to *know* Will; to *see* him. But instead, he builds a prison around his wanting and he stays tightly bound within his person suit, even when he wants nothing more than to break free of them both.

Will himself is similarly reticent, and Hannibal knows it. Will still hides behind his mask, even when his body intertwines with Hannibal's and they move together as a beast with two backs. Will is just as guarded as Hannibal is, in his own way. He is a skilled lover, the best that Hannibal has ever known, but he is ascetic with regards to his own pleasure. He will allow himself to orgasm, will bring himself to climax using Hannibal's body, but he resists any attempt that Hannibal makes to bring him pleasure on his own. He refuses to relinquish control. Any time that Hannibal moves to touch him, with his hands or with his mouth, Will rebuffs his attempts. Hannibal does not mind this: he has accepted Will's boundaries whenever they are set before him, but he knows them for what they are. He knows that they are Will's own means of self-preservation, the bars of Will's own prison that he has built around his wanting.

And so they make love, their bodies flushed and tangling together, grappling for closeness through the bars of their own separate cages. Hannibal wants to fuck Will, he wants to spread him flat on his stomach and taste him, he wants to press himself inside Will's body until they are cleaved together like stone, until neither man nor God could ever hope to separate them. He wants equality between them, balance; he wants there to be no part of Will that he has not tasted, that he has not explored and felt from the inside out. He suspects that, somewhere behind the mask, Will wants the same thing, but neither of them move to make it happen. They are back on the edge of a precipice, and once again neither gives any indication that they intend to step over it.

There are times when Hannibal tells himself he won't go back to Will anymore: that Will is too dangerous for him, that Will is an intoxication that will drive him straight to ruin. And yet he finds his feet leading him back to Will's campsite anyway, night after night, his hands nearly ripping off the door to Will's little cabin in his haste to reach the man inside of it.

He and Will are unkind lovers. They have none of the nervous tenderness that usually accompanies the early stages of a courtship. Their lovemaking is ravenous and unaffectionate, brutal and utterly hypnotizing. They hardly ever kiss, but when they do, Hannibal feels it spread through his body like holy water, all the way to the tips of his fingers and toes. He wants to swallow Will's body whole, he wants to ring pleasure out of Will's skin until he weeps from it. But instead, he holds himself back. He allows himself only small tastes of the things he wants to devour. He allows himself just enough to sate the hunger of the beast in its cage, just enough to bank the flames of desire that threaten to burn him from the inside out.

It is not enough, and yet it is an amount that he can no longer live without. And so the cycle continues, and Hannibal wants. He wants, and wants, and wants.

But, he reminds himself, his wanting will be his unmaking if he does not maintain his caution. He cannot trust Will, he reminds himself. Will is slippery, as silver-tongued and many-faced as Odysseus. Will is using him. Will is all smooth skin and barbed-wire fences; Will is a chimera, smirking at Hannibal from behind his mask. Will is an inferno, looking for something to burn; Will is a stray hand, looking for a teacup to shatter.

And so Hannibal keeps his distance. Or, at least, he tries to, although admittedly there are times when he finds this more difficult than others. Admittedly, there are times when Will manages to catch him off guard. When Will is asleep, for example, heedless of the prison bars between them, and Hannibal finds his longing taking on a far more lethal shape.

Will is beautiful while he's sleeping, his delicate cheeks flushed pink and his thick lashes dark against pale skin. His hair presses against Hannibal's shoulder in a riot of soft curls, and Hannibal can feel the warm kiss of his breath on his skin. Will clings to Hannibal like a sweet-smelling vine when he's asleep, twining his arms around Hannibal's torso and pressing his face into the skin of Hannibal's neck. When this happens, Hannibal feels his heartbeat as a staccato rhythm somewhere high up in his throat. When this happens, Hannibal wishes he could stop the forward progression of time entirely.

Sometimes Will makes pained noises while he sleeps, his face creasing and his skin growing damp with sweat. In these times, Hannibal allows himself to indulge in more of this forbidden tenderness: he strokes Will's hair, presses kisses to his forehead, and murmurs soft words until Will grows quiet again. In these times, Hannibal feels a strange constriction in his chest; he finds that it is hard for him to breathe.

Are you a killer, Will? he wonders. *Behind the mask, are you like me?*

These are the times that Hannibal finds himself tested: these are the times that Hannibal feels himself inching closer and closer to the edge of the precipice. These are the times that Hannibal thinks he might have lived another life entirely, in some other world: a life not built around control and order and a carefully maintained person suit, but around the shared communion of two souls. And these are the times when Hannibal reminds himself just how dangerous Will Graham is to him.

It is in just such a time that Hannibal now finds himself, cradling a sleeping Will in his arms and calculating exactly how much longer he can stay here while still arriving at the hospital

in time for the beginning of his shift. Will has been asleep for hours now, and Hannibal needs to leave quickly, but he tarries for as long as he can, until at last he has no choice but to draw himself away. He tries to do so slowly, smoothly, but Will stirs at the movement anyway, and he pulls his body free from Hannibal's immediately upon waking. Hannibal feels the warmth leaving his arms like the loss of a limb, and he reminds himself that it is for the best.

"Hannibal?" Will asks, his voice hoarse from sleep.

"Go back to sleep, Will," Hannibal says, and Will's face curls into a moue of bleary-eyed displeasure.

"What time is it?" he asks.

"It's four thirty," Hannibal tells him, and Will scrubs a hand over his face.

"*Shit*. How long was I asleep?" he asks. "You should have left hours ago. Sorry about that."

Hannibal forces a bland smile, and he tries to ignore the sting of displeasure he feels at the apparent shortness of his welcome.

"No need to apologize, Will," he says.

Will draws in a breath. "Think you'll come by tonight?" he asks, and Hannibal rises to stand.

"It's too early to say," he lies, and he pulls his clothing up off the floor.

Hannibal can feel Will's eyes on him while he dresses: he can feel Will watching him as he pulls on his trousers and shirt, as he smooths the fabric of his clothing and restores order to items that had been shed so carelessly hours before. He wonders what Will is thinking. It is not until he moves to pass through the door that Will finally speaks again.

"Hannibal," he says, and Hannibal grows still. Will's voice sounds hollow, strained. Will's voice sounds as though it might be masking just as much roiling, yawning dissatisfaction as Hannibal's in this moment. Against his better judgment, Hannibal allows himself to hope.

"Yes, Will?" he asks, gazing over his shoulder. He can barely see Will through the darkness, but he can smell him, he can hear the sound of his breath. After a moment, Will sighs.

"Ah, it's nothing," he says. "I'll see you around."

Hannibal nods, swallowing the disappointment that promises to settle in his stomach like an over-salted meal. He opens the door.

"Very well, Will," he says, and he steps out into the predawn darkness.

Hannibal arrives home just as the sun is beginning to rise. He showers quickly, running lathered hands over his torso and rinsing away the sweat and dried semen that coat his body like a second skin. This part of his new routine is odious to him: he hates to know that he is washing the scent of Will away, washing away the scent of the things they've done, but it is

an unfortunate necessity. He is out of the shower before his wife wakes up, and he is in the kitchen cooking eggs when she comes downstairs.

“Good morning, Hannibal,” she says with a yawn, and she makes her way over to him on quiet feet. “Another late night at the hospital?” she asks, and Hannibal nods, leaning down as she rises up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

“Yes, a very late night,” he says. “I confess I am a bit exhausted.”

Alana leans her hip against the counter beside him. “Has Doctor Sutcliffe given any indication that these ‘personal issues’ of his are going to be resolved any time soon?” she asks. “It’s unreasonable of him to expect you to keep picking up the slack like this.”

Hannibal releases a deep sigh of feigned resignation. “No, he has not. I suspect it will remain this way for many months to come.”

Alana frowns at this, letting out a displeased huff and crossing her arms over her chest.

“You should tell him you won’t keep doing this anymore, Hannibal. He’s taking advantage of you. It’s not right.”

“Darling,” Hannibal says, and he slides a hand around her waist, pulling her body against his and shifting so that she can wrap her arms around him, “Doctor Sutcliffe is going through a very difficult period in his life. I would never dream of holding him at fault for that. I will do whatever is necessary to support him.”

This is a lie.

In truth, Hannibal has no idea what is happening in Doctor Sutcliffe’s personal life, but the fabricated tale of woe is the perfect *carte blanche* that Hannibal needs to spend as many nights as he desires with Will. He is not worried that Alana will discover the truth: in the six years they’ve been married, Alana has never once visited the hospital. She has no interest in Hannibal’s work.

“I understand,” Alana says, and she leans her head against his shoulder, mere inches from the place where Will Graham’s curly head had rested only a few hours before. Hannibal presses a kiss to her hair, and he thinks that he does not like the scent of her floral soap. He thinks that he vastly prefers the smell of Will Graham’s hair to that of his wife’s.

“I appreciate your patience, Alana,” Hannibal tells her, and he shifts slightly so that he can flip the eggs.

“Oh, Hannibal,” she says with a sigh. “You’re always so ready to help a person in need. Just don’t forget to help yourself too every once in a while, okay?”

Hannibal hums. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

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W.

Will tilts his head back, trying to savor the feeling of morning sunlight on his face. There are clouds moving overhead, thick and white as tufts of cotton, charting a course for the dun-colored mountains in the distance. Somewhere off to his left, a warbler is singing. It is a beautiful day.

And yet, as always, it is not enough.

Three months have passed since Will pulled Hannibal into his bed; three months have passed since Will began taking sips from a glass that never seems quite full enough to quench his thirst. He has accomplished his goal: he has lured Hannibal into a physical relationship, but the victory has been a hollow one. Will has won the battle, but he knows that he has lost the war. He has allowed himself to want more from Hannibal than what it is his place to want. And, once the wanting started, he has not been able to make it stop.

Will wants to *matter*, to Hannibal: he wants to be more to Hannibal than the near-stranger he visits for a quick fuck a couple of nights a week. He wants Hannibal to *long* for him. He wants to confide in Hannibal, he wants to make Hannibal know him, *truly* know him. He wants Hannibal to *see* him: to see all the twisted, mangled parts of himself that he keeps buried, all the parts of him that go breathless at the beauty of brutality. He wants Hannibal to accept those parts of him, to cradle them, to cherish them in a way that no-one ever has before.

But this is impossible, and Will knows it.

Not only is he separated from Hannibal by a vast gulf of social disparity, there is also the minor fact that Will is a *liar* and a *murderer* to quash any hopes of their blissful union. He reminds himself constantly: Hannibal doesn't know *Will*, Hannibal isn't having an affair with *Will*. Hannibal knows the *mask*, Hannibal is having an affair with the man that Will *pretends* to be. Every single word that Will has ever spoken to Hannibal has been a lie (he has always preferred sins of omission, after all), and he is going to continue to lie to Hannibal until the day he finally leaves Redlands. He has to. Because what is the alternative? To tear off his mask? To cut his heart open and let all of the blood and the thorns and the darkness pour out of him and onto the ground at Hannibal's feet?

Hannibal would *detest* Will, if he knew the truth of him. Hannibal would be disgusted by him. *Repulsed*.

If Hannibal knew the truth of who Will really is, if Will were ever to pull away the blinders from Hannibal's eyes, Hannibal would see him for what he really is: a twisted, dark monstrosity of a person. Hannibal would treat Will the same way that everyone else treats him: as an object of contempt. And *that* is a thought Will cannot bear. *That* is a thought that sends needle-like pains into into the back of Will's throat, that makes his heart race and his

skin feel too small for his body. Hannibal Lecter's contempt is a far more terrifying prospect to Will than the threat of Mason Verger's retribution could ever be.

Will has never been afraid of pain, but Hannibal Lecter's disdain would be a wound from which he fears he would never recover.

I need to leave, he tells himself, every single day. *I need to leave.*

And so every morning, Will watches the sun rise, and he tells himself that by the time it goes down again he will have ended this farce. He tells himself that by the time the sun goes down he will have put Redlands and Hannibal Lecter far behind him at last. He tells himself that he will leave while he is still capable of leaving. But despite his best intentions, every nightfall finds Will once again breathless and waiting with his eyes fixed on the horizon, hoping that the darkness will give way to headlights once more.

Hannibal is like a drug to Will. Being around him is more intoxicating than anything he's ever experienced, be it sex or substance or murder. Hannibal disrupts his ability to think clearly, he makes Will want with a longing so vast that at times Will fears he will collapse beneath the weight of it. Will has lost track of how many times he's held Hannibal in his arms, that he's pressed himself inside Hannibal's body and sought release in the grasping embrace of his long, graceful legs, but still it is not enough. Will fears that it will never be enough until he has cut himself open at the seams and woven Hannibal into his very skin, until he has torn down the forts in his mind and invited Hannibal to plant himself a garden there instead.

But the problem is, the closer Will gets to allowing himself the things he wants from Hannibal Lecter, the farther he moves from accomplishing what *should* be his primary goal: his own continued safety. His independence. His mask.

And so he keeps his distance. He tells himself that it is not his place to feel betrayed when Hannibal leaves him after a quick fuck and returns to the woman he married, returns to the life he created for himself long before Will ever stumbled into his life. He tells himself that it is not his place to feel like his heart is being shattered into pieces every time he fixes his eyes on the pre-dawn horizon and realizes at last that Hannibal isn't going to come to him tonight. He tells himself that it is not his place to want Hannibal to cradle him, to treat him like some cherished thing.

After all, what is he if not a liar and a killer and an all-around piece of shit? What is he if not the proverbial snake in the garden?

What does he think that Hannibal wants with him, if not a quick fuck and an easy escape from his day-to-day routine? What does he think he was offering to Hannibal all those months ago in the rose garden, dangling himself like a carrot on a string and promising not to shatter any teacups?

Does he think that Hannibal wants to love him? To make a life with him? A family? Conversations over dinner?

A lifelong commitment?

What a fucking joke. Will would have to be delusional to think that Hannibal would ever want those things from him, and Will is nothing if not brutally realistic. And yet he finds himself hoping, against his better judgment, every single day.

And so it is that Will has passed the months since the beginning of his affair with Hannibal Lecter: thirsty but unquenched, aching but unsatisfied, and he does what he can to pass the time. He goes fishing, he visits Abigail, he eats dinner with Molly and Wally at the migrant camp. He finds ways to fill his days.

And that is what Will is doing now, with the morning sunlight on his face and white clouds moving overhead like tufts of cotton: he is finding a way to fill his day. But he is so distracted by his discontent that his mind has traveled somewhere else entirely, and he nearly misses the feeling of a slight tug at his line.

He moves only just in time to hook whatever fish has been nibbling at his bait, and he yanks it out of the water into the sun. It is small, as all of the fish in this little stream have been, but this does not concern him. This is the fourth fish he's caught today, and in combination with the others he thinks that it will be enough.

Will has been catching fish for two months now, and when he takes them to the orphanage Margot instructs the kitchen to prepare a meal especially for Abigail. Abigail seems to enjoy the taste of the fish Will brings: she finishes entire meals of it where she is only able to stomach a few bites of the ubiquitous pork slung out of the orphanage kitchens. Will tries not to give himself too much credit, but he thinks his fishing has helped Abigail in some small way. She is not so gaunt, anymore; she walks more steadily, she smiles more often. She is able to focus on her reading, and she acts more like the child she is. Will may not be able to be the father that Abigail needs, but he tells himself that he can do this much for her, at least. He tells himself that he can do this much for her, before he flees town with his tail between his legs at last.

With the fourth fish caught, Will takes his bounty back to camp. He checks the status of the linens slung over a clothesline, testing their progress with his fingers. He finds himself washing his blankets often now, any time that Hannibal visits him, and it is always jarring to see the results of their nocturnal encounters laid bare beneath the bright, revealing light of day. The blankets are nearly dry but not quite there, so he leaves them where they hang and prepares the fish for the orphanage kitchens. He scrapes away scales, cuts off heads and fins, pulls out organs and spines, and he does his best to ensure that all that remains for Abigail are the tender parts. When he's done, he strips down and cleans himself off, rinsing away sweat and the other detritus of a night of fucking, along with the flotsam and jetsam of a morning spent catching and disemboweling fish. When he's done he gets dressed, and then he heads to the Verger Family Orphanage.

He doesn't bother knocking at the wide double doors anymore, he simply lets himself in and meanders down the hallway to Margot's office. Today her door is open, and when Will leans in to say hello he sees that there is a man standing in front of her desk with his arms folded and his head tilted with an air of self-importance. The man is wearing an ostentatious suit, and Will can smell his cologne from several feet away. Will pauses, considers leaving, but then Margot sees him and her eyes brighten.

“Hey, Will!” she calls, and Will takes a step inside.

“Hey Margot,” he says, and the man in the office turns to face him. He raises an eyebrow and runs his eyes over Will’s body, from his scuffed-up shoes to his wrapped package of fish, from his threadbare shirt to his disheveled hair, and Will can feel his contempt from several feet away, nearly as thick as his cologne. The man purses his lips.

“Hello,” he says. “And who might *you* be?”

“Doctor Chilton, this is Will Graham,” Margot tells him. “He’s a friend of Abigail Hobbs.” She meets Will’s eyes over Chilton’s shoulders and gives him a smile. “Although I think he may be *my* friend now, too. What do you say, Will? Are we friends?”

Will’s shoulders have gone stiff, his entire body tense in the face of Doctor Chilton’s clear disdain. “Yeah Margot,” he says, “we’re friends.”

“Well in that case, friend, why don’t you join us in my office?” Margot says, and Will steps farther into the room. He moves so that he is standing beside Doctor Chilton, and he pretends not to notice when the other man shifts his body away. “So, Will, what brings you here today?” Margot asks. “Is that more fish I see?”

“Ah, yeah, it is,” Will says. “I brought it in for Abigail.”

“Abigail Hobbs is currently in my infirmary,” Chilton interjects, “and I strictly monitor the diet of *all* my patients. I’m afraid your *fish* will have to be eaten elsewhere, Mister Graham.”

Will feels his heart leap up into his throat. “Abigail’s in the infirmary?” he asks Margot. “Why? Since when?”

Margot sighs. “Some of the other kids were picking on her,” she says. “They started fighting, and one of them pushed Abigail down. It’s nothing serious, just some scrapes and bruises, but I thought it would be good to separate her from the other kids for a while.”

Will feels a sickly, curdling sorrow settle in his stomach. *Poor Abigail* , he thinks. He knows all too well what it’s like to be the victim of childhood cruelty.

“Is she okay?” he asks. “May I go see her?”

“*No* you may *not* go see her, Mister Graham,” Chilton proclaims loudly beside him. “As I said, Abigail is *my* patient, and I make *all* decisions with regards to my patients. You will not be permitted to visit her while she is under *my* supervision.”

Will swallows around the lump in his throat and shifts his gaze to Chilton. “May I ask *why*?” he grits out, and Chilton raises his eyebrows.

“Certainly, Mister Graham,” he says. “Because Abigail is *my* patient, and *I* don’t think it’s a good idea to let her interact with people who are a *bad influence* while she’s in a state of recovery. I’ve heard the rumors about you, Mister Graham. Who knows, you might even be the reason Abigail was targeted by the other kids in the first place.”

Will feels a tightness in his chest, he feels as though his stomach has been filled with ice water. Could this be true, he wonders? Could it really be his fault?

Margot clears her throat. “Doctor Chilton,” she says, “if you’ll recall, the other kids have disliked Abigail since the first day she arrived. Will’s been nothing but a positive influence for her. I should know, I see her every day.”

Chilton’s lips curl down, and he sends a disapproving glare across the desk at Margot. “I must confess I’m *puzzled* by your policies, Miss Verger,” he says. “This man is a suspected murderer, and yet you allow him into the company of one of our most vulnerable charges. Aren’t you afraid of what kind of effect someone like Will might have on Abigail?”

Will presses his lips together, shifting the package of fish in his hands and feeling a deep-rooted tendril of self-loathing coil its way up out of his stomach and into his throat. *He’s right,* Will thinks, *he’s right*.

He remembers what Hannibal said in the rose garden, all those months ago: “You shatter things and leave it to others to pick up the pieces.”

Is that what he’s doing to Abigail?

“Worried about what kind of effect Will might have on Abigail?” Margot repeats, and Chilton nods.

“Yes. It is my *professional opinion* that people like Will are a threat to a growing child’s well-being. Well, to *anyone’s* well-being, as a matter of fact, but to *children* especially.”

“That’s an interesting theory, Doctor Chilton,” Margot says, and she leans back in her chair. “In that case, if we’re worried about exposing the kids to ‘bad influences’, I wonder what kind of effect it has for them to be around someone who flunked out of medical school three times, once for cheating?”

Doctor Chilton stiffens, his arms falling to his sides and his face growing red.

“That has nothing to do with-” he begins, but Margot cuts him off.

“But I think it *does,* Doctor Chilton,” she says, and she leans forward over her desk, folding her hands and smiling at him primly. “After all, the accusations against Will are just that: *accusations* . In fact, at this point they’re little better than gossip. If you’ve kept up with the papers, you’d know there hasn’t been any evidence to convict him, after all. Meanwhile, it’s a *fact* that you flunked out of medical school three times, and there’s *plenty* of evidence you were caught cheating. Perhaps I should consider hiring a replacement, then. Maybe Doctor Lecter could help me find someone. What do you think, Doctor Chilton? What’s your *professional opinion*?”

Chilton’s face has grown an alarming shade of puce, but Will hardly notices. *He’s right,* Will thinks, his heart beating rapid-fire in his chest, *he’s right and he doesn’t even know the half of it. He doesn’t even know a* tenth *of what I’ve done.*

“Doctor Chilton,” Margot says, her voice loud, and Will snaps his gaze back to her with a lurch, “would you be so kind as to escort Will to the infirmary so he can visit Abigail Hobbs?” she asks, and Chilton sighs.

“If you *insist*,” he says, and Margot rises to stand.

“As a matter of fact, I *do*,” she tells him, and she steps around the desk. “I’ll take that fish to the kitchens now, Will,” she says, and Will blinks down at the package in his hands. He feels dizzy.

“Thanks, Margot,” he manages to say, and he swallows around the dryness in his throat. Chilton sighs again.

“Let’s get this over with,” he says, and Margot gives him a beaming smile.

“Enjoy the rest of your day, Doctor Chilton,” she says. “Goodbye, Will. Come back *any* time, I mean it.”

Will can hear the words that Margot is speaking, but he doesn’t register them. His mind has traveled somewhere far away, imagining Abigail’s little life shattered like a teacup on the floor at his feet. Shattered, because of *him.*

“*That is what you do*,” Hannibal had told him, all those months ago. “*That is not disorder, Will. That is destruction*.”

Chilton’s right, Will thinks, even as he trails down the long hallway after him, *I* am *a bad influence.*

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H.

Hannibal makes it back to Will’s campsite a little after midnight. It is far later than he’d wished it to be, but he’d had to make do with what was available to him. He had cooked dinner after leaving the hospital, had shared a meal with his wife and gone to bed with her, made love to her and held her in his arms for what felt like an interminable period of time, until at last he was able to draw himself away with a mournful-sounding apology and a kiss. He showered as quickly as he could, and when he stepped out into the night air he felt as though he were shedding an ill-fitting coat, as though he could move and breathe again, at last.

Will is still outside when Hannibal pulls into the campsite, sitting by the fire and staring into it. Hannibal cuts the engine, and when he slides out of the car he sees that Will has risen to stand.

“Hey, Hannibal,” Will calls, and Hannibal immediately grows still.

There is something strange about Will’s voice. It is softer than normal; it is missing its usual serrated edge. Hannibal studies Will for a moment, and he notices the downward slope of his shoulders, the way he seems to be drawing himself inward. Something is different, Hannibal thinks. He’s never seen Will like this before.

“Hello, Will,” he says at length, and he draws a bag out of his car. “I’ve brought you dinner. Have you eaten?”

Will shakes his head. “No,” he says, and he sounds surprised by this fact. “No, I guess I forgot to.”

Hannibal makes a disapproving sound at this and shuts the car door. He makes his way to the small table close to the fire, and he begins to unpack the contents of his bag.

“Is everything alright, Will?” he asks, and Will lets out a breath.

“Yeah,” he says, “everything’s fine.”

His tone is unconvincing. Hannibal sets the table methodically, and he does not allow himself to look at Will again until the task is complete. When he finally does look, Will is staring back into the fire, his eyes cast in shadow. Will is magnificent by firelight, his face a brilliant chiaroscuro of light and darkness. Hannibal’s fingers itch with the urge to touch him.

“Are you certain?” Hannibal asks, and Will swallows. He is silent for several moments.

“No, actually, I’m not,” he admits at last, and Hannibal watches with fascination as Will argues with himself, as he debates with himself about how much he should reveal. “It’s just - something someone said, today,” he says, his voice tight, and Hannibal tilts his head.

“Would you care to talk about it?” he asks, and Will looks away again, his face curving into a frown.

“I’m not sure,” he says, and then he looks down at his hands.

Hannibal watches his movements with rapt attention. He is beginning to understand, now, that the Will with whom he is speaking is not the same Will that appeared at his hospital so many months ago. He is beginning to understand that he is interacting with the *real* Will, now, the Will that lives behind the mask. Will is showing Hannibal his soft underbelly, *at last*. Hannibal wonders if Will has any idea how much of himself he is revealing in these moments. He is nearly breathless with curiosity, nearly breathless with the desire to see more, to lure this side of Will farther out into the world.

“I… went to visit Abigail Hobbs today,” Will says, his words slow and uncertain. “I met a man who said I… might be a negative influence on her. I didn’t want to believe him, but the more I think about it, the more I think he might be right.”

“May I ask who said this?” Hannibal asks.

“His name was Frederick Chilton,” Will says. “He’s the doctor at the orphanage infirmary.”

Hannibal feels his face twist. “Frederick Chilton is a buffoon,” he states definitively. “You shouldn’t pay any mind to anything he says.”

Will looks over at him, his eyes gleaming in the light from the fire. “You know him?” he asks, and Hannibal nods.

“Unfortunately I know Frederick very well,” he says. “The man is an imbecile. A pompous peacock of a person who has never had a useful thought in his life.”

“But what if he’s right, though?” Will asks, his voice still tight. “I mean, think about it, Hannibal: I’m not exactly a model citizen. What kind of good can I possibly do for Abigail? Look at how I live, look at who I am. What kind of example do I set for her?”

Hannibal is enthralled. Will’s mask has slipped so far that it is like he has become a different person. Will is speaking freely, offering Hannibal the sorts of thoughts and fears that he had guarded so fiercely, so adamantly during their long-ago dinners in the rose garden. It is mesmerizing.

“I disagree with Frederick,” Hannibal says. “You understand the reality of the world we live in. He does not. Frederick is a housecat who has spent his entire life eating from a bowl that other people have filled for him. He has nothing to teach anyone.” Will makes his way over to the table while Hannibal speaks, studying the food and settling at last into the opposite chair. Hannibal resists the urge to lean forward across the table.

“And *I* do?” Will asks at length, his voice unsteady, and Hannibal nods.

“Yes, Will,” he says. “I suspect that you have a great deal to teach those who are wise enough to listen.”

Will swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing. His eyes are startlingly bright. “I’m not sure I can trust your judgment here, Doc,” he says. “You don’t know me very well.”

Hannibal stiffens, and he resists the urge to show Will just how very much he would like to get to know him better. “I should hope that I know you better than Frederick Chilton does, at the very least,” he says instead, and Will’s face curves into a smile. It is a smile Hannibal has never seen before: one that is small and sweet, open and honest, with none of the glinting smirk of the usual expression. Hannibal savors the sight of this smile: he tries to commit it to memory. He thinks that Will is enchanting, like this. He finds that he wants desperately to kiss him.

“Yeah, okay, that’s fair at least,” Will says, and the mesmerizing smile lingers.

“You care deeply for Abigail Hobbs?” Hannibal asks, and Will looks down at his hands, his face falling.

“Yeah,” he says quietly, “I do. She deserves so much better than what she’s ended up with. I just want to make her life a little better, but the more I think about it, the more I realize how

unsuitable I am to do that."

"What is it that makes you think you're unsuitable?" Hannibal asks. Will huffs out a laugh, and he raises his eyes back to Hannibal's.

"The *better* question is what ever made me think I *could* be suitable in the first place," he says, and he twirls his fork in his fingers. He bites his lip, and a small line forms between his eyebrows. "She'd be better off with a man like you," he says after a moment, his voice very soft.

"I have no interest in children," Hannibal says immediately, by rote, but he second-guesses the words as soon as he has spoken them.

Perhaps it would not be so bad a thing, to have a child, he thinks, *if it meant I could keep Will Graham close to me.*

"That's too bad, Hannibal," Will says after a moment, his voice very low. "I think you'd make a great father."

Hannibal studies Will across the table, and he marvels at the differences between this man and the man he is accustomed to seeing. He is accustomed to Will's snide smirks, to his cutting remarks and the taunting glint of his flirtation, but there is nothing snide, nothing sharp or cutting about this side of Will. This side of Will is delicate and tender, open and honest. This Will is crystalline, as ephemeral as a piece of sculpted glass. This Will is so beautiful that he makes Hannibal's breath draw short in his chest; this Will is so beautiful that Hannibal wants to cradle him between his fingers like a bird. Hannibal wants to drown this Will in Armagnac, to cover his body in flames and consume him whole.

Destruction and rebirth, Hannibal thinks, *what a captivating thought.*

"Likewise, Will," he says at length, and Will gives him a twisted smile.

"Thank you, Hannibal," he says. "You're wrong, but I appreciate the sentiment."

"No thanks are necessary, Will," Hannibal says. "I'm merely telling you the truth."

Will lets out a quiet sound. "I think I like your version of the truth more than I like Doctor Chilton's," he says. "Or my own, for that matter."

"Were you ever able to visit Abigail, Will?" Hannibal asks. He finds that he is curious. In truth, he had not known that Will was still in contact with Abigail Hobbs.

"Yeah I was," Will says, "but only because Margot Verger put her foot down about it. It was nice of her, I'm not sure why she did it." Will draws in a breath suddenly, licking his lips and rising to stand. "But I don't know why we're talking about this," he says, and he shakes his head as if to dispel a fog. His shoulders tighten, and his face changes abruptly. His veil of sadness falls away, the translucent tenderness piling like cloth at his feet, and he is all sharp edges and glinting corners once more. "You didn't come here to listen to my problems, did

you, Doctor Lecter?" he asks, his voice laced with its usual cynicism once more. "You had *other* things on your mind when you came here, I'm sure. You want to go inside?"

Hannibal licks his lips, and he tastes the bitter tang of his own disappointment against his tongue. *Just like that*, he thinks, *Will has gone behind the mask again*. The meal Hannibal brought is still spread out on the table between them, but it is growing cold. Hannibal supposes it will have to remain uneaten.

"Certainly, Will," he says, and he pushes his chair away from the table. Despite himself, he can already feel the initial tendrils of arousal uncoiling themselves in his gut. Despite himself, he is still looking forward to what they are about to do. "Let's go inside."

A Very Nice Face

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh, the feedback on the last chapter was so great!! Thank you all so much <3 <3

My process for writing Will-behind-the-mask is as follows: 1) watch clips/gifs of the scenes in the show where Will is particularly vulnerable/nurturing/flailing for love and affection, 2) get really sad, 3) write chapter, 4) still be really sad, 5) think about Mizumono too much, 6) return to step one. It's been a journey LOL, and we still have a long way to go! Anyway, I love this chapter a whole lot and I hope that all of you do too <3. Thanks as always for reading!!

W.

Will doesn't doubt that Frederick Chilton is an asshole. He doesn't doubt that he's an egotistical prick or a peacocking son-of-a-bitch, either. What Will *does* doubt about Frederick Chilton is that he's wrong about Abigail.

After all, there's no denying that Will leads a less-than-admirable life. He's killed more people than he can count. He's cut the flesh from their bodies and cooked it over an open flame on days when the hunger pangs became too much and alternative sources of food were few and far between. He's fallen asleep in motel rooms and woken up three days later covered in blood that he knows was not his own. He's fallen so far into the minds of other killers that he's spent entire weeks feeling like his body was not actually his own to control.

Will knows that he has done things, *terrible* things. Will knows that he has done terrible things that he can't even remember doing. But the worst of it is, Will *enjoyed* those terrible things. Sure, there's a part of him that recoiled, that drew back in horror from his own brutality, but there's another part of him, equally present, equally vibrant, that embraced that wickedness, that delighted in every part of it. There's a part of him that finds savagery unspeakably beautiful, that draws the cruelty and the magnificence close to his chest and presses them both against his beating heart. There is a part of him that thinks the beauty of the world can only be fully understood when you are intimately aware of its brutality. There is a part of Will that only feels free when he is at his worst, and he has never been able to cage that part of himself. Instead, he put it to use.

Instead, Will used the part of himself that delights in wickedness to make a mask: a smirking, scoffing, glinting mask that laughs at disdain and deflects contempt like rainwater. He used the part of himself that delights in wickedness to build an armor that could protect him on all sides from the sorts of threats he knew would eventually undo him. Will made a mask of his wickedness, and he does not believe would have survived for very long without it. That mask has sheltered him for years, guarding him against dismissal, judgment, contempt and misunderstanding. That mask has guarded Will against the pressing reality of his own aloneness, and he has spent years convinced that that mask has been his only choice for survival.

But now, with his arms elbow-deep in a truck engine and his mind replaying the conversation with Doctor Chilton on an interminable loop, Will finds that he's beginning to think deeply about the kind of man he is. Will finds that he's beginning to think deeply about the man he's kept hidden behind his mask for so many years, the man who wants *more* from life than wickedness. The man who wants love. Affection. Care. Stability. The man Will that has learned it's best to pretend simply does not exist.

And yet that man *does* exist, as the conversation with Doctor Chilton has made so painfully clear.

Is there such thing as a tender-hearted monster? Will asks himself. *Is there a word for what I am? Besides killer? Besides murderer? Besides cannibal?*

But at the end of the day, Will knows, the question is irrelevant. At the end of the day, Will knows, tender-hearted monster or no, he *is* a killer. He *is* a murderer. He *is* a cannibal. He may be playing the good man in Redlands, looking after Abigail when no-one else is available, but who does he think he's kidding? What game does he think he's playing?

At the end of the day, Will knows, Abigail deserves *better* than him. Abigail will *always* deserve better than him. Abigail deserves better than a used-up rag of a person whose soul can't seem to tell the difference between the beauty of a morning sunrise over dun-colored mountains and the beauty of a mangled corpse sprawled like a patchwork quilt in the dirt at his feet. Abigail deserves better than a man who's barely able to thread one day to the next. She deserves better than a man who has to live a lie to make people want to be around him. She deserves someone like Hannibal, a man who could offer her the kind of love, stability, and support that Will can only dream of being able to offer. Abigail deserves the life that Hannibal could give her.

And speaking of Hannibal: when is Will going to end this farce of a relationship with him? He should have ended it weeks ago; he should have ended it before it had even begun. But once it started, Will could not find it within in himself to make it stop. He knows he can't let himself get too close, he *knows* that Hannibal is dangerous to him, and yet every day that passes only seems to make him yearn for the man more and more. When is he finally going to tear himself away, he asks himself?

When is he finally going to close the door on this fucked-up chapter of his life once and for all, leaving nothing behind him but a trail of broken lives shattered like teacups?

When? Will thinks, panic rising like bile in his throat. *When am I going to leave?*

It is with this question ringing in his mind like a bell that Molly interrupts him with a gentle hand on his arm, pulling him out of the mire of his thoughts and asking if he's ready for dinner.

He's not. In truth, he feels like he might be sick, but he says yes, because what else can he do? He checks the fittings of his mask, worn threadbare by months of intimacy with Hannibal and the particular strains of the past two days, and then he follows Molly back to her camp. He does what he has to do to make it through the day.

But although the mask is in place, although the mask continues to shelter him as he shares another humble meal with the Fosters, although the mask laughs and jokes and practices pitching with Wally until well after the sun has begun to set, although the mask deflects Molly's flirtations and maintains a happy demeanor, Will knows that the mask is growing weaker with every passing moment. Will knows that the mask cannot protect him from the lingering maliciousness of his own thoughts. He knows that the mask cannot protect him, cannot protect *itself,* from damage that is self-inflicted. He knows that the mask is not immune to the singular power of his own self-destructiveness.

By the time he makes it back to his campsite, Will feels as though a fog has settled over his mind, as though he is making his way through a syrupy haze. He wonders whether Hannibal will visit him tonight, and then he reminds himself of the dangers of hoping for things that never come. He falls asleep alone sometime after midnight, curled around his isolation and accepting at last that the Good Doctor is not going to come to him.

His sleep is restless, and plagued by vivid dreams. He dreams of cat's cradles coiling up out of the earth like vines, spreading over his body and pinning him down. He dreams of opening his mouth to cry out but not making any sound. He dreams of watching his chest split open, of watching in horror and mute fascination as doves and tangled rose bushes burst forth from his ribs.

He dreams of Hannibal as a great horned beast materializing out of the darkness, pulling him close and telling him that he can trust him, telling him that he will protect him. He dreams of the great horned beast touching him, pressing him down onto his stomach and asking him if he would like to keep going. He dreams of the great horned beast spreading him open with his mouth and his fingers, pressing inside of him and stripping away his thorns from the inside out.

He dreams of the great horned beast moving in his body like a tide, and he wakes up with his blankets tangled and his cock aching, his hips canted upward and his legs open like an invitation.

Will presses his hands against his face, and he chokes back a sob. He feels, suddenly, the horrible, pressing reality of his aloneness, for the first time in years, and he wonders if the great horned beast has come to him as a warning or a sign.

Was the great horned beast a warning about the dangers Hannibal Lecter presents to him? A warning about the dangers Will will face if he lets Hannibal give him all the things that he so desperately wants? If Will allows himself to trust him?

Or was the great horned beast another thing entirely? Not a warning, but an enticement? A sign that Will needs to look closer? To look deeper? A sign that he and Hannibal Lecter may have more in common than Will could have ever imagined?

What is the great horned beast? What is it trying to tell him?

What does it mean? And does it even matter?

Does anything matter, now, besides the deafening desire to lay prostrate beneath that weight again, to open his arms and soul and invite the great horned beast back in?

Will asks himself these questions, and he stares up into the darkness in his little cabin until eventually he realizes that he can hear the sound of a sickening crunch somewhere in the back of his mind. He realizes that he can hear the sound of a brittle snapping, and he knows with a dull sense of finality that it's the sound of his own armor breaking. He can feel the stinging yank of seams being ripped apart, he can feel his mask sliding down his face and brushing tattered edges on his shoulders. He can feel the man behind his mask being exposed, bit by bit, and there's nothing he can do to bring himself to stop it.

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H.

It has been many years since Hannibal visited the Verger Family Orphanage, but he still remembers the way to Margot's office. He follows the steps by memory, passing through the double doors and down the hallway. Margot's door is open, and Hannibal taps lightly on the wood of the frame until she turns to him and smiles.

"Hello, Doctor Lecter," she greets, and Hannibal smiles back at her.

"Hello, Margot," he says. "May I come in?"

"Certainly, Doctor Lecter," she tells him. Hannibal closes the door behind him and he settles himself into one of her chairs, watching as she makes her way to her wide desk.

"How can I help you today, Doctor Lecter?" she asks, and Hannibal wonders whether she is hiding any bruises.

"I came to check on Abigail Hobbs," he says. "It's been some months since she left my hospital. I thought I ought to pay her a visit and ensure she's still in good health."

This is a lie.

In truth, Hannibal is here because he's curious about Abigail Hobbs. He's curious about what it is that makes Will so drawn to her. In his experience, Abigail has been little more than a small, silent charge in his hospital, one with a propensity for wandering the hallways like a troublesome little wraith. He doesn't know what it is about her that has so thoroughly captured Will's regard, and, upon reflection, Hannibal has found that he's displeased by Will's preoccupation with her. He's found that he wants the only thing in Will's life to be *him*. He thinks it might be time to end Will's relationship with Abigail Hobbs once and for all.

"Ah," Margot says, her painted lips curving slightly. "I see. Well, Doctor Lecter, I have some bad news. Abigail Hobbs has been moved to our infirmary - nothing serious, just some scrapes after a fight with the other kids, but you'll have to go there to see her." She rests her eyes on Hannibal's face, drawing in a breath and clearing her throat. "That's alright, though. I'm sure Doctor Chilton won't have any of the same objections to *your* visit that he had for Will Graham's visit yesterday."

Hannibal gives her a blank smile. "Will Graham has visited Abigail?" he asks, feigning surprise, and Margot nods.

"Yes," she says, "he visits her a lot, actually. She adores him."

"And Doctor Chilton takes exception to her adoration?" Hannibal asks, and Margot laughs.

"No, he takes more exception to *Will*, I think. He claims that the rumors about Will make him a 'bad influence' on Abigail. I thought that was pretty ironic, given the circumstances."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "The circumstances being, of course, Frederick's own history?" he asks, and Margot's painted lips curve up into a grin.

"Exactly," she says, and Hannibal smiles. He likes Margot. He wonders what has happened to her to brighten her spirits so dramatically since their last meeting.

"Have you seen Will Graham lately, then?" Margot asks, and Hannibal licks his lips.

"I'm afraid I have not had the pleasure," he says. "I've not seen Will Graham since he left my hospital some months ago."

"Oh, that's too bad," Margot says. "He's been looking a little peaky lately. I heard he set up shop a couple of miles from the migrant camp, out near Route 38. Maybe you should check in on him there. Maybe later this week, if you have the time."

"I will bear that into consideration," Hannibal says slowly, and Margot smiles again. Something about the expression brings to mind the Cheshire cat Will has told him about, the one in the wonderland story, and Hannibal wonders what it is that Margot is trying to do by driving him closer to Will. "In the meantime, Margot," he says, "how are you? Have you fallen from any horses lately?"

Margot huffs out a quiet laugh and shifts in her seat. "No, I haven't been riding many horses lately, Doctor Lecter," she says. "I've taken up different hobbies. New ones."

Hannibal lets out a quiet hum. “I see,” he says. “I’m glad to hear it, Margot. It’s always good to try new things.”

Margot’s face spreads again, and she gives him another wonderland-cat smile. “I think so too, Doctor Lecter,” she says, and Hannibal rises to stand.

“Thank you for letting me know where to find Abigail,” he says. “I won’t take up any more of your time.”

Margot rises to stand as well, extending a slim hand over the wide expanse of her desk. “It was good to see you, Doctor Lecter,” she tells him, and Hannibal takes her hand in his. “Think about what I said about Will, okay?” she says. “I’m worried about him.”

Hannibal clears his throat, and he wonders again what it is that she is trying to do. “I will see if I can find the time,” he tells her, and then he releases her hand and makes his way to the door. In the meantime, Margot steps back to the window, and she calls out to Hannibal just as he reaches for the doorknob.

“Oh, by the way, Doctor Lecter: happy anniversary,” she says, and Hannibal feels a tendril of irritation uncoil in his gut. He had forgotten that it is his anniversary today.

“Thank you, Margot,” he says. “Is Alana still here?”

“Yes she is,” Margot tells him. “She’s supervising playtime. I can tell her to meet you in the infirmary, if you’d like,” she says, and Hannibal feels his fingers tighten around the doorknob. Alana had not been a part of his plan for the day.

“That would be wonderful, Margot, thank you,” he says, and then he passes through the door.

His next stop is the infirmary, which he finds empty aside from the small form of Abigail Hobbs occupying a bed by the window. Her dark head is bent over a tattered string tangled between her fingers, and she looks up at the sound of the opening door. Hannibal wonders where Doctor Chilton is.

“Hello, Abigail,” he greets, and Abigail blinks at him.

“Hi Doctor Lecter,” she says quietly, and she untangles the string from her fingers. Hannibal watches her tuck it away beneath her pillow when he draws near.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, Abigail,” he says. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay,” Abigail says slowly, hesitantly. She never speaks much, to Hannibal.

“Have you been eating?” he asks, sitting down on the empty cot next to hers, and Abigail nods.

“Yes,” she says. “I ate my whole dinner yesterday. Mister Will brought me fish.”

Hannibal inclines his head. “Did he?” he asks, and Abigail nods.

“Yes. He brings me fish a lot. It’s my favorite thing to eat.”

“Oh?” Hannibal says. “And what other sorts of things do you do when Will visits?”

Abigail clears her throat. “We go for walks,” she says quietly, “we play cat’s cradle. We draw. He helps me practice my reading.”

“I see,” Hannibal says thoughtfully. “Abigail, did you know that Doctor Chilton thinks Will shouldn’t visit you anymore?” he asks, and he watches as Abigail’s eyes go wide, watches as her small face grows pale and pinched with fear.

“He does?” she asks, and Hannibal nods gravely.

“It’s true,” he says. “He thinks that Will is a bad influence for you.”

Abigail blinks rapidly at this, twining her tiny fingers in her lap. “He’s wrong,” she says in a shaky voice, her thin shoulders trembling. “He’s wrong. What does he even know anyway?” she whispers, and suddenly she straightens, suddenly she looks up and meets Hannibal’s eyes for the first time in the entirety of their acquaintance. “How can Doctor Chilton know *anything* about Mister Will,” she says, her voice suddenly louder, more steady, “when he spends all his time in his office?”

Hannibal lets out a thoughtful sound at this, curious at Abigail’s sudden change in demeanor. “Does he?” he prods, and Abigail nods.

“*Yes*,” she tells him. “He’s *supposed* to my doctor, but he never checks on me the way you did. He hardly ever talks to me,” she says, holding his gaze, and Hannibal feels his lips twitch, feels his eyebrows draw together as he fights off a grin.

Clever Abigail, he thinks.

“*Really*?” he asks, feigning concern, and Abigail nods.

“*Yes*,” she says again. “He’s supposed to be my doctor, but he never asks me how I feel or helps take care of me. Only Mister Will does that.”

“You feel that Doctor Chilton has been negligent in his role as your doctor?” Hannibal asks, and Abigail nods again.

“*Yes*,” she says. “He pretends to know everything, but really he doesn’t know anything. He’s a *liar*, and it’s wrong to lie, isn’t it, Doctor Lecter? I think *he’s* the one who’s the bad influence, not Mister Will. Don’t *you*, Doctor Lecter?”

Hannibal folds his hands in his lap, and he resists the urge to laugh at Abigail’s clumsy attempts at manipulation. He decides that he quite likes Abigail Hobbs. He decides that he’s no longer displeased by Will’s regard for her.

“It isn’t polite to talk about other people when they’re not here, Abigail,” he chides, and Abigail blinks up at him, a small line forming between her eyebrows.

“But he’s wrong about Mister Will,” she says. “He *is*.”

Hannibal licks his lips, prepares himself to speak again, but he finds that he is interrupted by the sound of a voice in the doorway.

“Hannibal!” it calls, and he turns to find that his wife has come into the infirmary. “What an unexpected surprise!”

Hannibal feels a shiver of irritation, and he resists the urge to grimace. Instead, he rises to his feet with a warm smile.

“Hello, Alana,” he greets, and he leans down into a kiss when she draws near.

“I didn’t know you were going to visit today!” she tells him after pulling her face away. “Margot said you came to see Abigail? That’s wonderful!” She tilts her head down and smiles at the little girl in the cot. “Hi, Abigail,” she coos. Her voice is unnaturally loud, strained with over-sweetness, and Hannibal watches Abigail’s face go blank.

“Hello Mrs. Lecter,” she says dully, and then she turns her eyes down to her lap. Alana shifts her gaze back to Hannibal.

“Abigail’s very shy,” she tells him in a knowing tone, and then she slides her arm through his. “This is such a happy coincidence,” she continues. “I dropped my car off for service earlier today. Margot was going to give me a ride home, but I’ll just go with you instead.”

Hannibal forces his face into a look of feigned regret, opens his mouth to speak, but Alana speaks first.

“If you’re going to tell me that you planned to go back to the hospital,” she says, “I’m going to stop you right there. It’s our *anniversary*, Hannibal. Doctor Sutcliffe can survive on his own for one night.”

Hannibal feels a coiling in his stomach, a tightness, a seething displeasure. He hears the faint ringing of a bell in the space behind his right ear. He had planned to leave the hospital and go straight to Will’s campsite, to see if there was any hope of luring the man behind Will’s mask further out into the world. But instead, he finds that he is struggling against the straining fibers of expectations that seem to be woven into the surface of his very skin. He leans down to kiss his wife’s forehead.

“Of course, Alana,” he tells her, “we will have a wonderful evening.”

Alana smiles up at him, and she tightens her grip on his arm. Hannibal turns his gaze back to Abigail and finds that she’s been watching their entire exchange, her eyes blank and her mouth in a thin line.

Clever Abigail, he thinks again, and he gives her a smile.

“It was nice speaking with you, Abigail,” he tells her. “Make sure to finish all your meals and practice your reading.”

“Okay, Doctor Lecter,” she says, and she continues to watch them as Alana tugs gently at his arm.

“Come on, Hannibal,” she says, “let’s go home.”

And with one last look at Abigail, Hannibal assents. Hannibal allows himself to be led past the row of narrow cots, out into the stairwell and down to the first floor. He allows himself to be led to his car, allows himself to be led by the suspended strings of expectations that he spent nearly seven years constructing, and that in the space of less than six months he has grown to despise. He casts one last glance back at the infirmary as he opens his car door, and he finds that Abigail Hobbs is standing at the window, watching him through the glass.

Clever Abigail, he thinks, and then he turns away.

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W.

It’s been three days since Hannibal’s last visit, and Will tries not to expect him. He tries, and he largely fails. He presses lonely fingers at the tattered edges of his mask and he reminds himself of the life that Hannibal leads when he isn’t wasting time with Will: a successful career, a “charming wife”, a host of friends and acquaintances. Will reminds himself that he is little more than a temporary distraction for Hannibal. He reminds himself that his novelty was bound to wear off sooner or later.

He visits Abigail, who is still in the infirmary. She asks if he would like to draw with her, and they sit in companionable silence as sunlight pours in through the open windows. Doctor Chilton is nowhere to be found, as usual, and for a moment Will feels like they could be back in the rose garden, surrounded on all sides by sleeping doves. Eventually Abigail speaks again, telling him that Doctor Lecter visited her yesterday, and Will tries not to sit up straighter in his seat at the news.

“Did he?” he asks, and even he can hear the rippling eagerness in his own voice.

“Yes,” Abigail says. She lifts her gaze to his for a moment before she guides it back down to her paper. She’s drawn two clumsily-rendered ringneck doves, one big and one small, sleeping next to a stream. “His wife was here too,” she continues, and Will’s fingers tighten around his pencil, and he feels his mask slip a little farther down.

“I see,” he says, and he fights to keep his voice steady. He doesn’t want Abigail to pick up on his bitterness, on the yawning void of his loneliness. “That’s good, Abigail. It’s good for you to have visitors other than me. Doctor Lecter and his wife are a good influence for you.”

Abigail frowns at this, seemingly displeased by something he's said. "Have you ever met Mrs. Lecter?" she asks, and Will presses his lips together.

"No, I can't say I've had the pleasure," he says, and he hopes that she can't hear the strain in his voice.

"She's very beautiful," Abigail tells him, and Will feels tattered edges and ripped seams brush against his shoulders, "but I don't like her. I like you a lot better." Will feels his eyebrows crease at her words, and his lips twist into a bitter smile.

Well, he thinks, *at least* somebody *in the world likes me better than the 'charming', 'beautiful' Mrs. Lecter*.

He prepares himself to leave the infirmary hours later, and it isn't until he rises to stand that he allows himself to look down at the scene his fingers have drawn on his paper. He sees with a dull sense of horror that he's sketched a stream surrounded by trees, and that in the middle of the stream there are three figures: two men, one tall and broad-shouldered, the other smaller and curly-haired, standing beside a little girl with a baseball cap too big for her head. Will's stomach gives a sick lurch when he realizes what he's done, and he moves to crumple the paper between his fingers when Abigail stops him, her eyes wide.

"Don't throw it away!" she cries, her voice tight. "Please, it's beautiful! Can I have it?"

Will swallows around the lump in his throat, looking down at the paper and wondering what Abigail will do with the drawing when he finally leaves Redlands. He wonders what Abigail will do with the drawing when she realizes that Will is long gone, when she realizes that she's been left behind once again. He thinks he might be sick.

"Sure, Abigail," he says, and he hands her the drawing with trembling fingers. "You can keep it."

Will leaves the orphanage feeling as though he's being trailed by an invisible shadow, as though he's dragging the tattered fabric of his mask behind him like some sort of twisted bridal veil. His unease lingers all the way through dinner with the Fosters, and it follows him back to his campsite. He can't shake it, no matter what he does. Something is going to happen, he thinks, he just doesn't know what it is. He doesn't know how to prepare for it. All he can do is wait.

And so he does wait. He waits until some time just after nightfall, when he's laying in his cabin staring up at the aluminum ceiling, studying the shadows of circling carrion birds and thinking about the great horned beast, wondering what he's going to do about the tattered shreds of his mask, when he hears the sound of a vehicle approaching. He feels his heart skip a beat, thinking that it might be Hannibal, and he finds himself out of his bed and through the door of his cabin before he's consciously aware of it. He realizes his mistake immediately, though, as the shape of the blinding headlights in the darkness is not the same as Doctor Lecter's car. Will has never seen these headlights before.

The car draws close to Will's camp and then it stops, and two figures emerge, huge and shadowed in the darkness. One of them moves to open the door to the backseat while the

other steps closer to Will where he's standing outside his truck. Will's stomach tightens, and his heart leaps like a jackrabbit in his chest when he realizes what is about to happen.

"Evening, gentlemen," he says, struggling to keep his voice steady, "how can I hel-"

The figure approaching Will silences him with a swift punch to the stomach, and Will doubles over, coughing and choking as the man grabs him by his hair and pulls him back upright.

"Jesus *Christ*," Will sputters, trying to catch his breath, and he sees that a third figure has emerged from the car, much smaller, and that he and his huge companion are making their way across the camp.

"Good *evening*, Mister Graham," the smaller man says, and Will realizes, suddenly, who he is: Will remembers a billboard lit like a beacon in the darkness, Will remembers the face of a man who looked like a maniac even in cartoon form. Somewhere in the back of his mind, panic heaves itself up out of a hole in the ground with stretching fingers, wrapping itself around Will's throat. "Do we know each other?" Will manages to ask, and the man leers at him.

"You don't know *me*, Will Graham," he says, putting his hands on his hips and keening in a sing-song voice, "but *I* know *you*."

The second black-clad man steps away from Mason and moves to the other side of Will, grabbing his arms and binding his wrists tightly behind his back.

"My name is *Mason Verger*," the man continues. "You might have *heard* of me. I don't mean to *brag*, but I'm a *pretty important guy* in this town."

Will draws in a shuddering breath, and he feels a riotous dislike beat itself like drums against his temples. "If you're so important," he can't help but ask, even though he knows he shouldn't, even though he knows it is a bad idea, "then what you are doing *here*?"

Mason's lips twist, and he tips his head while Will receives another heavy blow to the stomach.

"I *like* this one, boys," he tells his cronies, and he laughs when Will chokes against the pain in his torso. "I *like* the ones with *spirit*. And you've *certainly* got *that,* don't you Mister Graham?" Mason pauses for a moment, tapping his index finger against his lips. "Say, let's play a *game*, Mister Graham. Can you guess why I'm here?" he asks, and Will draws in a shuddering breath.

"I'm guessing you're here because there's been another murder," he grits out, and Mason's face spreads into a twisted grin.

"Got it in *one*!" he cries. "Jeez, Mister Graham, you must be *smart*!" He tilts his head and gives Will another smile. "I just *knew* Jack Crawford wouldn't try to bring you in again after his little *humiliation* last time. He wouldn't want more *bad press* in the papers, right Mister Graham? Who would? So, I figured I'd pay you a little visit *myself* instead. I thought you and

I could have a little *chat*, man-to-man, no *pesky* police officers around. I thought that sounded like *fun*. And wasn't I *right*? Isn't this *fun*?"

In his peripheral vision, Will can see that one of the massive guards is moving, can see that he's slipping his hands down to finger at a gun belted around his waist. Panic begins to paw its way along the walls of Will's mind, making his breaths draw short and his legs feel like they're filled with water. He realizes that he is utterly defenseless out here, that his privacy has come at a very high cost.

"Let's play *another* game, Mister Graham," Mason says. "*I'll* ask *you* questions, and *you'll* tell *me* the truth. Sound like *fun*?"

Will's eye lose focus, his body sways and his gaze drops to the dirt at Mason's feet until he's lurched back to clarity by the feeling of a sharp slap against his cheek. The world snaps back into focus, and he finds that Mason is leaning very close to him, so close that he can smell the man's foul breath.

"Did I *lose* ya there for a second, Mister Graham?" he asks with a leer. "That's no *fun*. You have to pay *attention*, or you'll never win the *game*." He straightens to his full height again, tilting his head. "So let's try this again: *did you kill my guard, Mister Graham*?" he asks, and Will shakes his head.

"No," he manages, to say, "I didn't."

Mason's face twists into an exaggerated frown, and one of the guards punches Will in the stomach again. Will feels his legs crumple beneath him, but he's caught and held upright by one of his looming shadows. His head lolls loose on his neck.

"I'm not sure I *like* that answer, Mister Graham," Mason sings. "So let's try that again: *did you kill my guard*?"

Will's entire body has begun to shake, and he fights to keep his voice steady. "*No*," he says again, "*I didn't*."

Mason heaves a sigh and flits a lazy hand, and immediately one of the guards lands another strike against Will's stomach. Will lets out a strangled cry. Every blow compounds the pain in his torso, and for a moment his vision goes black around the edges.

"Mister Graham, I hate to tell you this, but I'm not having much *fun* with this game we're playing," Mason tells him. "I'm losing my *patience*. I'm getting *bored*. So, I'm only gonna ask you this *one more time*: did you kill my guard?"

Will heaves a strangled breath, and he finds that he is shouting. "*No*," he grits out, "*I didn't*." Will feels his head yanked back by the hair again, feels his heart leap into his throat at the sight of one of the guards cocking his huge fist back, but Mason stops him with a lifted hand.

"That's enough for tonight, boys," he says. "I'd *hate* for you to hurt Mister Graham's *face*." He steps close to Will again, leaning down and moving his eyes over Will's features. Will tries not to breathe; Will closes his eyes and tries to will himself out of existence entirely. He

wants to *kill* Mason Verger. He wants to snap Mason's neck like an ear of corn, to savor the satisfying *crunch*. "After all," Mason continues, "it's a *very nice face*."

The guard holding Will upright releases him abruptly, and Will crumples gracelessly to the ground.

"I sure *hope* you're telling the *truth*, Mister Graham," Mason says, grinning down at Will where he chokes and struggles to catch his breath in the dirt. One of the guards bends down and unties the rope binding Will's wrists, and Mason nudges his back with his foot. "Cause between the two of us, Mister Graham, this is just a *taste* of what's coming for you if you're not."

And then Mason turns his back to Will, and the trio walk back to the long black car in silence, leaving Will crumpled like a pile of tangled string. Will wonders, suddenly, where Hannibal is, what Hannibal is doing in this moment. He wonders whether Hannibal is making love to his wife, his wife who isn't just "charming", but is also beautiful. He wonders if Hannibal is spreading her legs open over clean, sweet-smelling sheets, pressing his cock into her body and moving inside her like an unrelenting tide. He wonders if Hannibal is thinking to himself how *beloved* she is, how *cherished*, and how very *different* she is from the prickly, thorny Will Graham. He wonders if Hannibal is kissing her forehead as he moves inside her, if her body is held taut and tingling and captive to the pleasure. He wonders if Hannibal will hold her after she has fallen asleep, breathing in the scent of her hair.

Will wonders if Hannibal ever thinks of him at all, except in the moments when he is there beside him.

I need to leave, he tells himself, curling around the pain in his torso, curling around the pain from the bruising and the pain from the depths of his own hopeless longing. *I need to leave before sunrise.* And so he stays that way for several minutes, fighting to regain his strength, until at last he rises.

And then he begins to pack.

Don't Get Too Close

Chapter Notes

Okay let's just get this out of the way LOL: I am SO SORRY for the huge delay between chapters!! A lot of stuff happened that made my life get extremely busy all of a sudden, and every time I tried to write I hated what came out because it all sounded like it was put through a very obvious filter of the stress that I was experiencing. So I decided that rather than put out writing that I hated for the sake of speed, I would wait until the storm passed and I was able to write naturally again. Things have settled down a lot and I am finally back in a place where I can write the way I want to. The chapters may still be longer in coming because I am still busy, but I promise that I won't forget about or abandon this story!

To those of you still reading, thanks so much for your patience! And those of you who commented on the last chapter, I read through your feedback and it was all so sweet and so hugely encouraging. I honestly can't tell you how much I appreciated it. Thank you so much!! <3

And with that, I give you a bit of a doozy of a chapter to hopefully make up for the cliffhanger. More smut and the build up to some serious D-R-A-M-A in the coming chapters. It's good to be back ;)!

H.

It is 3:00 am on the second day after Hannibal's anniversary, and he finds he cannot sleep. He finds that something is wrong, although he does not know what it is. He can feel it in the air: a specter of unease hovering above his bed and trailing long tendrils over his skin. It reminds him of nothing so much as Will Graham's fingers.

Will Graham, he thinks, *Will*.

Where is he?

What is he doing?

What specters might be visiting *him* in these predawn hours?

Hannibal tries to stay still, he tries to will himself to sleep, but that specter of unease persists, keeping him awake. That unknown *something* lures him to rise out of his bed and pass into

the night. That unknown *something* stirs the beast to wakefulness in its cage.

“Disorder is the natural state of the universe, Doctor Lecter,” Will had told him, all those months ago. “You can’t avoid it forever.” And so at last, Hannibal stops trying to avoid it. Instead he rises, and he goes to meet that unknown *something* head-on. The specter of unease dissipates, and Hannibal thinks that he knows exactly where to find the disorder he is seeking.

Hannibal arrives at Will’s campsite to find it disassembled. The clothesline and the table and the little collection of cookware, the fishing lures and the small carved pieces of wood, all the old familiar signs of *Will* and of his presence here are gone, and the little home that Will has built in the preceding months seems to be at risk of complete abandonment. It is dark in the campsite, the fire long since burned out, and there is only the distant light of the full moon and constellations to bear witness to the dissolution of Will’s small world.

Hannibal’s eyes adjust quickly to the darkness, and he gets out of the car as Will emerges from his cabin. Will looks unsteady, even more tired than usual, and there is a sharpness about him that has nothing to do with his usual glinting self-possession. Rather, Hannibal thinks that it’s the sort of sharpness that accompanies a wounded raptor in a cage, and he wonders what it is that’s clipped Will’s wing.

“What are you doing here, Doctor Lecter?” Will asks, his voice tight, and Hannibal shuts the car door with a gentle click.

“What are *you* doing, Will?” he asks, and Will steps down from his cabin.

“Now, now, Doctor Lecter,” he chides, but his voice sounds hollow, “all those years in school and you’re telling me you can’t figure it out?”

He turns from Hannibal then, stalking away to the front of his truck and shining his flashlight down into the entrails of the engine. Hannibal follows him on silent feet, listening to the now-familiar sound of ringing in the space behind his right ear.

“Did you ever intend to tell me you were leaving?” he asks, and Will makes a sound like a scoff.

“Nope,” he says. “Frankly, Doc, I wasn’t sure you’d even notice I was gone. It’s been a while since you stopped by, I figured you’d forgotten about me.”

“I hadn’t forgotten about you, Will,” Hannibal says slowly, cautiously, “nor am I likely to. Why are you leaving?”

“What reason do I have to stay?”

Hannibal finds that his heart is racing, he finds that the trailing fingers of unease are now digging beneath his skin, gouging channels across his chest and making it hard for him to breathe. “Are you so disinterested in what is between us?” he asks, and Will scoffs again.

"'What's between us'?" he repeats. "I'm not sure I *know* what's between us, Doctor Lecter," he says. "Do *you*?"

Hannibal licks his lips. He tries another tactic. "What about Abigail?" he asks, but Will is ready for that inquiry as well.

"*Abigail* will be better off without me," he says flatly.

The ringing in the space behind Hannibal's right ear has grown deafening, nearly loud enough to drown out his own words. "What about me?" he asks, and Will meets his gaze. His eyes are very bright.

"What *about* you, Doctor Lecter?" Will asks. "You'll be better off without me too. I'll leave, and you'll go back to your perfect life, and all of this will be put behind you for good. Doesn't seem like such a bad thing to me."

Hannibal finds that his heart is racing. Hannibal finds that there is a desperate electricity sparking beneath his fingertips, that the beast within him is pressing its claws against the bars of its cage. The beast doesn't want Will to leave. *Hannibal* doesn't want Will to leave, and he wonders suddenly what the man behind Will's mask wants.

"Do *you* want to leave, Will?" Hannibal asks, and he watches Will's face move in something like a spasm.

"What I *want* doesn't matter," he says after a moment. "What I *want* has never mattered, not to anyone."

Hannibal listens to Will speak, and he decides to take a chance.

"It matters to *me*," he says lowly, and he moves closer to Will in the darkness. He rests his fingers against the back of Will's neck and presses gentle circles there. He thinks about the man behind Will's mask, the man he suspects is hiding behind a prison made of anger and sharp edges. He thinks about what he can do to lure that man farther out into the world. "Has something happened, Will?" he asks. "You can tell me."

Will turns away from him, pressing his hands against his face and letting out a tight breath. Hannibal studies the shape of his arms in the moonlight, and he realizes suddenly that his wrists are ringed with bruises. The ringing in the space behind his right ear grows louder.

"Will," he says lowly, "tell me what happened."

Will drops his hands and stares into the darkness that surrounds them. "Mason Verger dropped by earlier," he says at last, and his voice is thick with a bitter facade of nonchalance. "There was another murder, and I guess I'm still the number one suspect."

"Mason was *here*?" Hannibal asks, and he feels the beast uncoil itself, feels a tar-black sludge begin to move beneath his skin.

"Yep, and he even brought friends," Will tells him. "He showed up with two armed guards, and for a minute there I really thought they were going to kill me. I'd rather not stay here like

a sitting duck until they finally decide that's what they're going to do, so I decided to leave. That's what I'm doing. I'm *leaving*."

"I can protect you from Mason, Will," Hannibal says immediately, pressing himself close to Will's body. "I can protect you."

Hannibal realizes, of course, what he's doing. He realizes that by vowing to protect Will Graham from Mason Verger he's allowing himself to be manipulated: he's allowing himself to do exactly what he suspects Will has wanted him to do all along. Hannibal realizes this, but he finds he cannot bring himself to act on the suspicion of Will's ulterior motives. He finds he cannot bring himself to draw away from Will despite his better judgment.

Hannibal suspects that there is no force in the known universe that could compel him to draw away from Will Graham in this moment, and so he shoves the whispering suspicions of Will's machinations into a dark corner of his mind, and he thinks about Mason Verger instead. He thinks about Mason Verger and his repulsive entourage putting their hands on Will's body, and he moves his fingers farther up Will's neck at the thought. He spreads his hands through Will's soft hair, curling his fingers until the beast in his mind lets out a happy purr.

"Why are you doing this?" Will asks, his voice tight, but Hannibal hardly hears him. Hannibal is thinking a much more captivating thought.

"Did you kill that guard, Will?" he asks, and Will draws in another sharp breath.

"No," he says, "I didn't."

"*Will*," Hannibal says lowly, and he moves his free hand to cup Will's chin, pressing his fingers until their gazes meet. "Did you kill that guard?"

Will is utterly still, his face frozen, and Hannibal imagines he can see cracks beginning to form on the surface of his mask.

"It's alright, Will," Hannibal murmurs, trailing his thumb over Will's pink lips, "you can trust me."

Will's eyes widen as though he has been burned, and he pulls away from Hannibal.

"*What did you just say*?" he asks, and Hannibal rounds on him.

"I said that you can trust me, Will. I said that I can protect you."

Something in Will seems to shift at Hannibal's words. His eyebrows draw together, his eyes take on a liquid gleam and his body begins to shake.

"Oh, Jesus," he says, and he presses his face into his hands again. "Oh, *Jesus*."

Hannibal becomes certain of two things in this moment: that he cannot allow Will Graham to leave Redlands, and that he cannot allow Mason Verger's trespasses to go unpunished.

“Will,” he says lowly, and he opens his arms in the darkness. “*Will.* Let me help you.”

Will drops his hands away from his face, and he stands blinking at Hannibal through the grey haze of the night until at last he moves, until at last he threads his arms around Hannibal’s waist and clings to him like a sweet-smelling vine. Hannibal tips his head up in bliss at the contact, and he closes his eyes.

“He’s a fucking maniac, Hannibal,” Will grits out against his shoulder, “he came out of nowhere.”

Hannibal closes his arms around Will’s body, pressing a kiss against his hair and murmuring comforting words.

“I’m such an idiot,” Will whispers. “I was so unprepared. They could have killed me and I couldn’t have stopped them. I thought it was *you*.”

Hannibal tightens his arms at this, and the beast lets out a dark rumble in its cage. “I won’t let them hurt you, Will,” he vows, and Will pulls away slightly, turning his face up.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks again, only this time his voice is soft, fragile, lacking its sharp edges. Hannibal moves his face down so that their noses are touching, so that they are sharing each other’s breath. Deep in the pit of his stomach, a yawning gulf of want is beginning to crack open.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he murmurs, and suddenly he feels Will’s hands against his skull, suddenly he feels Will’s fingers guiding him down into a kiss. Hannibal pulls Will against his body and feels the lean coiling of muscle beneath his clothes, feels the heat of Will’s cock already beginning to harden against him. “Would you like to go inside, Will?” he asks, and Will nods.

“Yes,” he says, “*yes*.”

Hannibal is careful not to move too quickly, careful not to startle the man behind Will’s mask back into hiding. Instead he follows Will into his small cabin, and he resists the urge to shove Will against the door and descend upon his neck like a starving animal as soon as it is closed. Instead, he steps closer, and he tips his head down to whisper in Will’s ear.

“I’d like to do something for you, Will,” he murmurs, and he hears Will draw in a sharp breath. “Will you allow me?”

“Yeah,” Will says quietly, “yeah, I’ll allow you.”

Hannibal imagines that he can hear the sound of metal breaking; he imagines that he can hear the thunderous roar of their own separate prisons crumbling to the earth, but he forces himself to go slow. He forces himself to draw Will’s body close, to press kisses against his face and his neck, to unbutton his shirt slowly, methodically, and to press it away from his shoulders in a gentle movement. It is only then that he sees the second set of bruises.

"*Will*," he says, and he feels his brows draw together at the canvas of lurid colors painted across Will's torso. "*Will*." He falls to his knees at Will's feet, and he runs gentle, reverent fingers over the mottled skin. Will is very still above him, drawing in ragged breaths.

"It's alright, Hannibal," he says lowly. "I've had worse than this before."

Hannibal knows that this is not a lie. Hannibal has seen the scars on Will's body: he's seen the mangled flesh, the signatures of all the people who have hurt him. Nevertheless, he is captivated by the bruises spread like dark peonies beneath Will's pale skin.

"I'll be careful," Hannibal tells him, and Will lets out a soft laugh.

"It's okay," he murmurs. His eyes are wide and unguarded, gleaming in the darkness like light through sculpted glass. "To be honest," he says, "I kind of like the pain."

Hannibal feels a surge of arousal at this, and he presses his face against Will's bruises, guiding his fingers to the button of his trousers. He slides the button and the zipper free and he presses the fabric down over the swell of Will's ass and to the ground. He lifts Will's feet gently, encouraging him to step away, and soon Will is bare before him. Hannibal gazes up at him, savoring the sight: Will is all pale skin and lean muscle, all wiry strength and translucent tenderness, all sharp edges and soft underbelly. He is unspeakably beautiful, like a vision from the Old Masters.

"Will," Hannibal says, and he finds that he can hardly speak around the desire thickening in his throat, "will you move to the bed, please?"

Will draws in a breath at this, licking his lips and staring down at Hannibal.

"Yeah," he says after a moment, "I can do that. How do you want me?"

"On your stomach," Hannibal says, and he watches Will's eyes grow wide, watches his delicate cheeks flush pink.

"Okay," he says, "okay."

Will moves to the bed and Hannibal removes his own clothing, stripping himself and withdrawing the Vaseline from its place beneath the mattress. Will is very still on the bed, and Hannibal trails a hand down his spine.

"We don't have to go any farther, Will," he tells him, "would you like me to stop? Or would you like to keep going?" Will draws in another sharp breath.

"I want you to keep going," he whispers.

And so Hannibal arranges himself at the end of the bed, coiling his long limbs around Will's pale body and spreading him open with his fingers. Will draws in a breath at the touch, and Hannibal tries to calm the racing frenzy of his own heartbeat. He has wanted to do this for nearly as long as he has known Will; he finds that he is desperately hungry for it. He presses gentle fingers at Will's entrance, listening to the stuttering sound of Will's breath, until at last he replaces his fingers with his mouth, kissing and biting at the sensitive skin, charting the

waves of Will's pleasure with his tongue. He hears Will let out a groan above him, feels him begin to squirm beneath the onslaught, and so he presses his palm against the flat of Will's back and holds him down until he grows soft and pliant.

"*Hannibal*," Will whispers through the darkness. He lets out a quiet sound, and Hannibal resists the urge to moan. He tells himself to go slow. He reaches for the Vaseline and uses it to coat his cock, swallowing against the sharp flare of pleasure and moving his hand back to Will's entrance. He spreads the Vaseline there slowly, pressing him open with his fingers.

"Oh, Jesus," Will grits out into his pillow, "oh, *Jesus*."

"Is this alright, Will?" Hannibal asks. "Would you like me to stop?"

"Yes, it's alright, no, don't stop," Will says, and Hannibal feels a curl of animalistic pleasure uncoil itself through every inch of his limbs.

"Very well," he says, and he rises at last, moving over Will's body and guiding his cock into place. "Are you sure?" he asks, one last breath before the plunge, and he waits for Will to speak before he moves.

"Yes, Hannibal," he says, "I'm sure."

Hannibal has fucked many people over the years of his life. He is well versed in the art of pleasure and well versed in his body's own capacity for it, but he finds that he is nearly overwhelmed by the feeling of pressing inside of Will. Will feels perfect, as though his body has been made for him, as though he and Hannibal were two carved pieces of stone specially formed to fit together. Hannibal feels like a stranger to his own limbs, like a stranger to his own pleasure. It is all that he can do not to lose himself within that swell, to blink through the haze that has settled over his vision and slur out a question. "Will," he manages to say, "are you alright?" and he hears Will respond as through a fog.

"God, yes, Hannibal," he says, "keep going."

And so Hannibal does. And so Hannibal slides himself back into the heat of Will's body, wrapping his arms around Will's shoulders and sinking his teeth into the flesh of Will's neck. And so he listens as Will lets out a moan beneath him, and he finds that he can no longer control the movement of his limbs. He finds that he can no longer control the steady snap of his hips or the pressing of his fingers against Will's bruises; he finds that he can no longer control the battering force of his own body as it moves in the darkness. He feels like an erosive tide, like he is chipping away at the edges of Will's armor piece by piece.

Destruction and rebirth, he thinks, pressing his face against the skin of Will's throat, *what a captivating thought.*

There is no light in the cabin, the lamp left unlit and the shutters closed against the moonlight, and in that hot darkness Hannibal feels that nothing in the world exists except their two bodies, moving together. The concepts of time and space seem superfluous to him now, and he is aware of nothing more than the need to keep moving, to keep pressing himself inside Will's body and murmuring quiet words to the man behind Will's mask. Hannibal

moves and he listens to the sounds Will makes beneath him, and he thinks that he needs nothing in the world aside from this. Will turns his head and presses his face against the pillow, muffling his cries, cutting them off at the root.

Will is trying to hide from his pleasure even now, Hannibal thinks, *trying to subdue it and silence it*, and so he reaches his fingers around the long arc of Will's white throat and pulls, lifting Will's face away from the fabric.

"Let me hear you, Will," he murmurs, and Will lets out a choked sound.

"Hannibal," he says, and his voice is breathless, endless, fathoms-deep. The sound of it cracks the tidewall of Hannibal's pleasure, and the force of his release breaks through at last. Hannibal drives himself back into Will's body once, twice, three more times before he spills himself in steady waves. He hears a sound escape his lips, something between a growl and a moan, and for a moment he forgets about the last seven years entirely. For a moment, he is the Hannibal of Florence once more, and he has never been so satisfied.

Will is breathing heavily beneath him, his body damp with sweat, and Hannibal pulls himself free before pressing Will onto his back. Will is still hard, his cock red and flushed between them, and Hannibal descends upon it with all the rabidity of seven long years of hunger. He swallows around Will's cock until his lean body tightens, until he lets out a strangled cry and comes deep into the back of Hannibal's throat. Hannibal drinks him down like a fine wine, and when it's over he spreads himself against Will's body, drawing Will close into his arms like some precious, sacred thing. He thinks that he has found that unknown *something* that was hovering above his bed.

"Will," he murmurs, and he presses a kiss against Will's hair. In the darkness of the cabin, Will seems to be glowing through the cracks in his mask. "Don't leave me, Will," Hannibal hears himself say, and Will's eyes are luminous in the darkness.

"I won't leave you, Hannibal," he says, "I won't leave you."

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W.

In the far reaches of Will's mind, past the stone forts and the fissures, past the tangled fishing line and the half-built motors, there is a house by the sea. Will has never been in this house, but he knows what is inside of it.

Inside the house is happiness: that elusive, captivating thing, that thing that Will can either see or touch, but never both at the same time. Will can linger in the front yard of the house, can feel the touch of the salt breeze on his face and listen to the sound of the waves against

the shore, but he cannot venture past the threshold. The farthest that Will can go is the front porch, where he can hover and linger and peek in the windows. He knows better than to try to go any further in.

That's where Will is now: on the porch of the house by the sea, peeking in through the curtains at the life he might have had, in some other world. Through the delicate, gauzy lace he can see that this once-empty house is now occupied. He can see the silhouette of a man with broad shoulders and long legs, with a lean waist and strong hands. The man is making dinner, moving through the airy, brightly-lit kitchen with the grace of a dancer. The window is open, and the aroma of his cooking wafts on the air and mingles with the smell of the sea. Stepping away from that window and moving to another, Will can see the shape of a little girl sitting on the floor with a book in her lap, he can hear the faint chime of her voice reading aloud to the shaggy dog that is sprawled beside her.

Will wants to go in. Will wants to go inside that house so badly it makes his stomach twist, it makes his breath draw short and his heart ache. He wants to go inside with such fathomless longing it makes him dizzy. But he knows that he can't. He knows that a happiness so pure as what he sees inside the house would disappear the moment he tried to reach for it.

And so he goes no further. And so he steps away from the window and guides his feet down the steps of the porch, away from the temptation of the happiness that lives on the other side of the walls. He walks away, but as soon as his feet hit the grass beneath the porch he hears the sudden sound of knocking. He turns back, and he sees that the front door is vibrating. He hesitates for a moment, unsure of what to do, and then he steps back up the stairs and cautiously approaches the front door. The knocking continues, a steady thrumming that travels through the air and crawls its way beneath Will's skin, making him shiver. He stares at the doorknob, glinting and golden and rattling.

Are they inviting me inside? He wonders. *Do they want me to come in?*

He tries to swallow around the fear that is crawling up his throat, he tries to swallow around the certainty that he will destroy this house and all the happiness within it as soon as he touches it, and he lifts a shaking hand to the door. He hovers his fingers above the doorknob for one moment, and then another, and then another, and he tries to decide what to do.

But before he is able to make a decision, darkness descends, and Will finds himself in another place entirely. He opens his eyes in the dimness, and he remembers abruptly where he really is: he is in his little cabin with Hannibal, and there is no house by the sea. The knowledge settles like a lead weight in Will's stomach. All is still and quiet around him except for a steady thrumming beneath his ear, and he realizes that the knocking he'd heard in his dream was actually Hannibal's heartbeat. He keeps his eyes on Hannibal's chest, on the hand that is gripped around Will's forearm, and his eyes catch on something gold. He imagines it gleaming through the darkness.

Hannibal's wedding ring, he thinks, and he thinks again of the golden doorknob. He thinks that it's best he didn't try to go inside the house by the sea.

"Go back to sleep, Will," comes Hannibal's voice, a sudden rumble, and Will draws in a sharp breath.

“How’d you know I was awake?” he asks, and Hannibal moves the hand with the golden ring up Will’s neck and through his hair.

“Your breathing changed,” he says simply. “Did you have any dreams?”

Will swallows around the acrid taste in his throat. “No,” he says, and Hannibal hums.

“I have to leave soon, Will,” he tells him, “but I’ll talk to Jack tonight. I’ll see to it that Mason Verger doesn’t visit you again.”

Will finds that he can’t stop thinking of the house by the sea, of salt breezes and rattling door knobs and golden rings, of the tangled threads of fate and circumstance that keep him from having all the things that he so desperately wants.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, okay, great. Thanks Hannibal.”

Hannibal draws in a slow breath. “If it happens that I do not come to see you, Will,” he says slowly, “it doesn’t mean that I’ve forgotten you. There are many demands upon my time.”

Will can feel the cool press of Hannibal’s wedding ring against his ear, and a curl of jet-black bitterness uncoils in his chest. “Yeah, Hannibal,” he says. “I know.”

Hannibal draws in another breath, tracing the fingers of his right hand over Will’s arm.

“You are more withdrawn now than you were before you fell asleep, Will,” he says. “Is there something you wish to tell me?”

Will presses his lips together, thinking of wide porches and uncrossable thresholds. He thinks of golden rings and the house by the sea.

“No, Hannibal,” he says. “Nothing at all.”

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H.

Hannibal arrives at Jack Crawford’s house well after nightfall, his timing intentional and his arrival unannounced. His goal is to catch Jack Crawford off guard, to corner Jack in his own territory while his defenses are down. He rings the doorbell and waits, studying the tasteful topiary on both sides of the portico until he hears the door swing open.

“Hannibal?” Jack asks, his eyes widening. He is still in his uniform but the top buttons are open, and Hannibal can smell the sharp tang of whiskey on his skin.

Mission accomplished, he thinks. He has caught Jack off guard.

“Good evening, Jack,” he greets. “Do you mind if I come in?” He watches Jack blink past his initial confusion and feels a silent curl of amusement at his discomposure.

“Of course,” Jack says, and he gestures into the foyer. “By all means, come in.”

Hannibal gives him an obliging nod and steps inside, wiping his feet on the doormat and removing his thin jacket.

“Can I offer you something to drink?” Jack asks, and Hannibal smiles.

“A whiskey would be wonderful, thank you,” he says, and he follows Jack down the long hallway into his study. There’s a fire burning despite the warmth of the evening, and Hannibal supposes that Jack has spent the last several hours staring into it, deep in contemplation.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” he says, and Jack shakes his head.

“Not at all, my friend,” he tells him. “Dry or on the rocks?”

Abruptly, Hannibal thinks of Will Graham. “Dry,” he says, and Jack grins.

“Coming right up,” he tells him, and Hannibal settles into a chair near the fire.

“Where is Bella this evening?” he asks.

“She’s in Los Angeles,” Jack says, handing Hannibal his glass and settling into the chair beside him, “visiting friends. She’s been making a trip there every few weeks for the last few months.”

Hannibal hums at this, and he spares a moment to consider Jack’s words. He remembers how Bella had looked the last time he’d seen her, how pale and wan and drawn, and he wonders if perhaps there are *other* reasons for her frequent sojourns in Los Angeles. He wonders if Bella will ever pay a visit to *his* hospital in search of a medical opinion. But he does not voice his thoughts on these matters. Instead, he merely sips his whiskey.

“I see,” he says, and Jack clears his throat.

“So Hannibal, not that I’m not always happy to see you,” he says, “but I have to ask: what brings you here this evening?” Hannibal takes another sip of his whiskey and he stares into the fire, feigning a sense of hesitation.

“Mason Verger,” he says slowly. “We need to talk about him, Jack. He’s getting out of control.”

Jack heaves a sigh beside him and he rubs the fingers of his free hand against his eyes. “You don’t have to tell *me* that,” he mutters, and Hannibal licks his lips.

“Do you remember Will Graham?” he asks, and Jack scoffs.

“Do I?” he asks. “Hannibal, I’ve spent the last six months trying to pin that guy down. *Yes*, you could say that I remember him.”

Hannibal ignores the sound of a faint ringing in the space behind his right ear and he casts his gaze to Jack. “And as I understand it, you were never able to find any evidence to convict him, correct?” he asks, and Jack presses two fingers against the bridge of his nose.

“That’s correct,” he says in a tight voice. “We’re up to three murders now, and still no evidence. If it *is* Will Graham, that man is a *genius* at killing and covering his tracks.”

Hannibal feels a thrill of pleasure at this, of coiling, tangled, uncertain pride, but then he presses it aside and forces himself to focus on the task at hand. “Do you know that Mason Verger paid Will Graham a *personal* visit, Jack?” he asks, and he watches Jack’s face grow pale.

“He did?” he asks, and Hannibal nods gravely.

“Last night, sometime after the third murder,” he says. “Apparently he went to Will’s camp with two guards that beat Will nearly senseless. Will came to the hospital today asking me to look at his injuries. I’m surprised his ribs weren’t broken.” Jack lets out a long, tight breath beside him, and he drains the remainder of the whiskey in his glass in one swallow.

“*Jesus*,” he breathes, and Hannibal hums.

“Indeed,” he says. “He’s getting out of control again, Jack. If Mason had his way, he would establish his very own martial law in Redlands, and you and the rest of the police department would never be able to get him under control again. You *know* this, Jack. You have to stop him before he gets that far.”

Jack leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and staring into the fire.

“Jesus Christ,” he says, and he shakes his head. “I *specifically* told him not to interact with Will Graham without telling me first. I *specifically* told him to stay *away* from Will Graham.”

“Well,” Hannibal says gravely, “it would appear he did not listen.”

Jack heaves a sigh and straightens in his chair. “You want another drink?” he asks, and Hannibal shakes his head.

“No, thank you,” he says, “I’m not quite finished with the first.” Jack grunts at this and rises to stand, and Hannibal watches him stalk over to the drink cart. “What will you do, Jack?” he asks, and Jack shrugs.

“Do what I always do, I guess,” he says, pouring himself another glass of whiskey. “I’ll *politely* remind Mason how the city government has turned a blind eye to the Verger tax records over the years and how much money we’ve spent making sure the State of California doesn’t get involved in the ‘oversight’ of the Verger operations.”

“Do you think it will be enough?” Hannibal asks, and Jack shrugs, moving back to his chair by the fire. This time he slumps down into it.

“I wish I knew,” he says, and Hannibal presses his lips together.

“Perhaps it’s time to try a different approach, Jack,” he says, and Jack turns to him with his eyebrows raised.

“Oh?” he says. “And what do you recommend?”

“I recommend that you tell Mason Verger that Will Graham is not guilty of the murders.”

Jack’s face folds into an incredulous scowl at Hannibal’s words. “You recommend I do *what* ?” he asks, and Hannibal sets his drink aside.

“Call Mason off the hunt, Jack,” he says, leaning closer in his seat. “Will Graham isn’t guilty, it’s time for you to accept that.”

“Hannibal,” Jack says slowly, “are you hearing yourself?”

“Loud and clear, Jack,” Hannibal responds. “As an outside observer, I’m able to see the situation more clearly than you are. You are *obsessed* with Will Graham, Jack, and obsessed with your certainty of his guilt. It’s time for you to break free of it, otherwise you have no chance of catching the real killer.”

“Will Graham *is* the real killer,” Jack says flatly, and Hannibal raises an eyebrow.

“Based on what evidence?” he asks, and Jack sits up in his seat. “Why are you so convinced of Will Graham’s guilt?”

“It’s like I said before, Hannibal: I just have a *feeling* about him,” Jack says, and then he huffs out a rough laugh. “Now that your wife’s not here I can be honest about it. Some people... you can just *tell* there’s something going on beneath the surface. Will Graham is one of those people. I’m a good judge of character, Hannibal. I can pick it out right away.”

Hannibal frowns, and he allows himself a moment to savor the bitter irony of this conversation. Jack has had nearly seven years to pick out the truth of Hannibal’s character, and yet he is no closer to the truth today than he was when they were first introduced all those years ago. Hannibal *knows* that this is for the best, he *knows* that this is because the person suit he crafted has been so expertly maintained, but still, despite himself, he finds there is a part of him that resents Jack Crawford’s failure to recognize the killer in him. He finds there is a part of him that has swum up from the dark places in his soul, that has broken its head above water and pressed its hands against the seams of Hannibal’s person suit, trying to touch the man behind Will’s mask. He finds there is a part of him that is trying to escape the cages he has built inside his mind, that there is a part of him that *wants* to be known for what he is, despite the multitude of dangers it represents.

“I confess I’ve never shared your opinion of Will Graham,” Hannibal says after a moment. “I’ve spent more time with him than you, I suspect, and I do not think that he would harm a fly.”

This is a lie, of course, but Hannibal delivers it with all the certainty of gospel truth. Jack lets out another rough huff of a laugh, and he gives Hannibal a pitying look across the space between them.

“You see the best in everyone, Hannibal,” he says. “Will Graham is playing you, you just can’t see it.”

The ringing in the space behind Hannibal’s right ear grows louder, and he licks his lips.

“You ascribe a great deal of influence to an impoverished man with no family or formal education,” he notes, and he takes a sip of his whiskey. “To be frank, Jack, you sound paranoid. Have you had any of your men track Will Graham since his release from the hospital? Margot Verger tells me he spends a great deal of time visiting a girl at the orphanage, and no doubt the rest of his time is spent trying to earn a living. It would take a superhuman effort to coordinate multiple murders on top of all of that.”

Jack lets out a sharp breath, and he presses a hand against his mouth. “But if it wasn’t Will Graham, Hannibal, then who else could it be?” he asks.

Hannibal feigns a thoughtful expression, and he thinks to himself that he is not being paid to do consultative police work. He thinks to himself that he could be spending this time coiled in bed with Will Graham, but that instead he is here, trading verbal volleys with a man so blind to the truth that he would lose his own nose in a hedge maze.

“It could be anyone, Jack,” he says, “anyone at all. That’s what makes the situation such a difficult one. You project guilt onto Will Graham because you don’t want to consider the alternative: that a killer walks free in your community, unchecked and unsuspected, and you have no idea who they are.”

(And if Hannibal is thinking of *himself* while he delivers this particular advice, he gives no indication. The seams of his person suit are impenetrable, still, despite all that is happening beneath them.)

Jack presses two fingers back against the bridge of his nose. “I’ll talk to Mason about Will, Hannibal, but I’m not changing my mind about his guilt,” he says definitively, and Hannibal nods.

“I understand, Jack,” he says, “I just want to make sure that Mason doesn’t get out of control.”

“Mason won’t bother Will Graham again,” Jack says, “that at least I can promise you.”

Hannibal sits back in his seat at that, pleased with his progress, until Jack clears his throat.

“Be careful around Will Graham, Hannibal,” he says after a moment, and Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

“You think I am in danger from Will Graham?” he asks, and he watches Jack take a long draw from his whiskey.

“I think *every* person Will Graham meets is in danger from him,” Jack says, “I just think that you are... particularly susceptible to his influence. I remember what happened in that interrogation room, Hannibal. You thought you were standing up for an innocent man, so I let it slide, but I haven’t forgotten. I’ve been keeping an eye on you. You want to see the good in everyone, Hannibal, but there is *no* good in Will Graham, I promise you that.”

Hannibal takes a sip of his own whiskey, and he feels a coiling sense of displeasure at the knowledge that he is being watched. “I disagree,” he says, and Jack huffs out another rough laugh.

“I *know* you do, Hannibal,” he says, and then he clears his throat. “How about this: I promise I’ll keep Mason Verger away from Will Graham if you promise me something in return.”

Hannibal taps his finger against his glass. He does not like where this conversation is going. “And what would that be, Jack?” he asks, and Jack sighs.

“Don’t get too close, Hannibal,” he says. “Promise me. I consider you a very dear friend. I don’t want to see that man ruin your life.”

Hannibal licks his lips, and he thinks of Will Graham trembling and ephemeral in the darkness, looking like nothing so much as a wisp of spun moonlight, or light through sculpted glass.

“I won’t get too close, Jack,” he says, “I promise.”

Jack gives him a small smile. “Thanks, Hannibal,” he says, and then he takes another draw from his whiskey. “Do you feel better, then? Do you feel like you can go home now? I’m sure Alana is waiting for you.”

“I do feel better Jack, thank you,” Hannibal says, “but you needn’t worry about Alana. She’s supervising a dance at the migrant camp this evening. She won’t be home for many hours yet.”

“Oh that’s right,” Jack says, “I heard some of my officers talking about that dance. I’m sure it’ll be a good time.”

Hannibal hums. In truth, he has no interest in the dance at the migrant camp; in truth, his only interest in his wife’s absence is due to hours that he will spend with Will Graham because of it. He has spent enough time talking to Jack Crawford, he thinks. It’s time for him to move on. He finishes his whiskey and rises to stand.

“Nevertheless, I have intruded on your evening long enough,” Hannibal says, and he watches Jack move to stand as well.

“On the contrary, Hannibal,” Jack says, “it’s always a pleasure to see you. I’ll walk you out.”

Hannibal bids farewell to Jack in the foyer, stepping out into the night with a sense of uncoiling anticipation. For a moment, he allows himself to consider Jack’s words: for a moment, he allows himself to consider that he is in fact being played for a fool by Will

Graham. But then he shoves that particular consideration to the back of his mind, and he gets in his car. He will go to see Will again tonight, he decides. It's unusual for him to visit Will two nights in a row, but he finds that he cannot keep himself away.

"Don't get too close," Jack had warned him, but Hannibal has already stored that warning alongside the argument with his wife in the box in his mind labeled "A Matter of Little Concern."

After all, Hannibal tells himself, *Jack has always been a fool.*

Fortune's Fool

Chapter Notes

Okay so the good news is: this chapter is being brought to you way more quickly than the previous one! Yay! The bad news is: I'm going out of town in a few days, so I won't be able to post the next chapter for a couple of weeks. Yikes! More good news though: the next chapter is already done, so I will be able to post it quickly after I get back :).

Thanks so much for the feedback on the last chapter! I love reading your comments so much. I hope you all enjoy this one, and... I'm sorry in advance for what happens in it LOL. Happy reading!

W.

Sunset finds Will on the outskirts of the migrant camp, slapping dust out of his clothes and trying to smooth his hair into some semblance of order. He hadn't planned to come to the migrant camp today; in fact, he'd planned to *avoid* coming here today. He'd planned to *avoid* the dance. He'd planned to *avoid* the press of eyes and bodies, the anxiety and the frenetic suffocation that crowds inevitably bring.

And yet, he has found himself here anyway, a testament to the best-laid plans of mice and men. He has found himself here anyway, compelled to join the throng by a terror far deeper than what he finds in a crowd.

Will had spent the day reassembling his camp and trying to clear his mind of the snarls and tangles had plagued him. He couldn't escape the memory of the house by the sea, or of the cold press of Hannibal's wedding ring against his ear. He couldn't escape the pressing realization that Hannibal has *changed* him, that Hannibal has made it so that he cannot bear to be alone anymore.

The knowledge of this irrevocable change was like a bell dropped off the edge of a dock in Will's mind: he can still feel it sinking and ringing through the fathoms of every part of him. The ringing serves as a constant reminder that *he* is changed, but Hannibal is not. It serves as a constant reminder that *he* cannot change *Hannibal* the way that *Hannibal* has changed *him*.

The realization of his own irrevocable change made Will feel as though the earth were shifting beneath his feet, as though his thoughts were unspooling like threads into the open air and piling at his feet. He spent the afternoon in a state of trembling suspension,

accompanied only by the echo of his own thoughts and the piercing sting of his own loneliness. Eventually, it became too much to bear. Eventually, it drove Will from his camp, it drove him to seek solace from his racing heart and his ringing ears in the presence of someone he hoped might help to blot them out, if only for a little while. And so he is *here*, facing a shocked Molly as she steps out of her tent. And so he is *here*, watching her as she takes in the sight of him with a gasp.

Will isn't sure what he's doing at the migrant camp, but he *is* sure of one thing: it beats the hell out of being alone.

Molly is wearing a dress. It's faded and clearly many years away from being new, but it's still lovely. It's still so far removed from the ragged, loose-fitting men's shirts and trousers Will is accustomed to seeing Molly wear that for a moment he barely recognizes her. "Hey Molly," he says, and he forces himself to keep going in spite of the ringing in his ear, in spite of the vibration in his limbs. "I thought I'd see if your invitation to the dance still stands."

Molly's eyes grow wide and her face curves into a smile. "Of *course* it still stands, Will!" she cries, and she steps closer to him with a conspiratorial grin.

"I have some whiskey, if you want it," she tells him in a whisper. "I know you don't like crowds. It might help take the edge off, no?"

Will bites his lip, spares a moment to decision. *Why the hell not*, he thinks. "Yeah," he tells Molly, "yeah, alright."

The whiskey is cheap and harsh, and it burns all the way down Will's throat, but by the time he's finished his second swallow he can already feel its warmth beginning to course through his veins. Molly offers him the flask again and raises her eyebrows in a challenge, and Will tosses the next round of liquid back in one long draught. When he's done, he sputters.

"*Jesus*, Molly, where'd you find this, a ditch?" he asks, and Molly laughs.

"If you don't like it, you can just say so," she tells him, and she slips the flask into a pocket of her dress.

"I didn't say *that*," Will says in a low voice, and Molly's eyes grow wide. His tone is unmistakable.

In truth, Will's flirtation surprises him as much as it seems to surprise her, but he feels a savage curl of pleasure when he remembers the cold press of Hannibal's wedding ring against his skin.

It's not like I owe him any fidelity, Will thinks, *given the circumstances. He said I could trust him, sure, but he still* left*, didn't he?*

Molly licks her lips, her skin pink and her eyes bright, and Will is about to say something else to her when Wally emerges from the tent looking uncharacteristically clean and pressed in a long-sleeved shirt and polished shoes.

“Hey Wally,” Will says, looking away from Molly’s flushed face, and he watches as the boy adjusts the cuffs of his shirtsleeves.

“Hey Will,” he says, and then he looks at his mother. “Is this okay, Mom?” he asks, and Molly clears her throat, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles in her dress.

“Uh, yeah, honey, you look great,” she says quickly, and Wally spreads his arms.

“So can we go now?” he asks, and Molly looks back to Will with a shy grin, a question in her eyes.

“Yeah,” she says, “I think we can.”

The sun is still setting when they set out for the center of the camp, and the combination of golden light and the whiskey curling smoky fingers around Will’s vision casts everything in a soft, welcoming haze. There are torches lit, lighting the pathway through the camp like beacons, and, as he trails behind Molly, Will feels like he might be passing into a dream. Strangers press in at all sides around him, the air thick and humming with the sound of their voices, with the suspended electricity of their shared excitement, and for a moment Will feels like he could lose himself within it. For a moment, Will feels like he could close his eyes and disappear completely into the welcoming blanket of their anonymity. But then he hears the sound of music rising above the susurrus of voices, and he opens his eyes to find that they have reached the dance floor.

It’s little more than a wide square of hard-packed dirt ringed with torches, but already it is filled with happy revelers. Will follows Molly to the edge of it and casts his gaze out over the gathered crowd, over the sea of careworn but happy faces. He hears Wally tell his mother that he’s going to find his friends, and he moves his gaze to the raised platform where the band is performing. He sees a slender wisp of black next to the musicians and he realizes that *Margot* is here, that *Margot* is standing on the platform, looking out over the crowd with a bemused expression. He keeps looking, and he sees that there is a beautiful woman standing beside Margot on the platform: a woman with long, curling dark hair, with pink rosebud lips and bright, laughing eyes. Something about the sight of her sends a shiver down Will’s spine; something about the sight of her makes Will’s chest feel tight and his shoulders grow tense beneath the fabric of his shirt. Something about the sight of her makes the man behind Will’s mask scrabble for the shelter of his battered armor, as though he already knows what’s coming, as though it hovers in the air like a coming storm. Molly clears her throat beside him.

“That’s Margot Verger and Alana Lecter,” she tells him. “Between the two of them, Will, you’re probably looking at ninety percent of the money in Redlands.”

Abruptly, all the whiskey in Will’s stomach turns to lead. He stares at the smiling woman on the platform, at the pretty slimness of her wrists and her waist, at her immaculate clothing, at all the signs of care and attention and love that are draped across her body like sunlight. Will finds that he can’t look away from her, despite the fact that looking at her makes him feel like his skin is being doused with boiling oil.

Alana Lecter, he thinks. *So* that’s *Hannibal’s “beautiful, charming” wife.*

And, to his dismay, Hannibal's wife *is* beautiful. Hannibal's wife *is* charming, smiling out over the crowd and laughing joyously at something Margot has just said. She *is* beautiful, and charming, and *more*. She is lovely, and delicate, and pure, and fresh, and bright, and all of the things that Will is *not*, all of the things that Will will never be.

No wonder Hannibal fell in love her, Will thinks, and he feels like he might be sick.

"Will?" Molly says hesitantly. (Will can hardly hear her voice through the hum of his rising intoxication. It passes to him as through a haze.) "I know I'm not exactly Alana Lecter or Margot Verger material, but do think you could bear to dance with me?"

Will tears his eyes away from the vision of the smiling woman on the platform, away from the vision of the woman who has all the things he wants but knows that he will never have, away from the woman who could have her house by the sea and more besides, and he turns his gaze to Molly instead. He studies her wide face, and the curling tendrils of the whiskey in his brain whisper to him of the sadness and self-doubt that have settled over her features like a veil. The whiskey whispers that the Alana Lecters of the world must make Molly feel just as dirt-poor and ragged, just as bone-weary and worthless as they make him feel, and isn't that a god-damned shame? Isn't all of this a god-damned shame, every single piece of it?

"I'd much rather dance with *you*," he tells Molly, tilting his face down close and reaching his free hand into her pocket for the flask. "Everyone knows rich people are no fun."

And at this, Molly smiles. At this, Molly's face lights up like one of the torches bordering the dance floor, and Will takes a long, deep swig from the flask before he leads her out onto the hard-packed earth. As they dance, Will thinks about Hannibal. As they dance, Will thinks about Hannibal leaving his campsite and going home to the happy, smiling woman on the platform. He thinks about Hannibal going home to the lovely, charming woman who is above Will in every sense of the word. He thinks about how Hannibal must draw that woman close, about how Hannibal must kiss her face and wake up with her hair spread across his shoulders. He thinks about how Hannibal must slide into her body like a river, how Hannibal must move across her soft curves and all her smooth, pretty skin like a tide.

Why even bother with me? He wonders, and then the whiskey-voice whispers in his ear again. The whiskey voice reminds him of a truth so sharp it threatens to pierce Will's eardrum: *Don't you remember the housecat and the dormouse?* It whispers. *Don't you remember the fish that isn't hungry? Don't you remember that he does this all out of* curiosity*?*

The ringing of the sinking bell threatens to turn Will's stomach, so he reaches for the flask again and dulls its cadence with another swig. Molly laughs and takes a drink too, and when they resume their dancing Will thinks about himself. He thinks that although Hannibal may speak pretty vows to him in the darkness, there will never be a place for him in Hannibal's daylight word. He thinks that the house by the sea will always remain barred to him, that he will never cross its threshold no matter how much the door may rattle.

After all, Will reminds himself, houses by the sea and men cooking dinner inside of them are the province of people like the smiling woman on the platform, the woman with pink rosebud lips and hair like dark waves, the woman who does not excite contempt everywhere she goes.

The woman who is not a *liar*. The woman who is not a *killer*. The woman who is not just a snake in the proverbial rose garden. Such things are for people like *her*, not Will.

And so he tries to pull his thoughts away from Hannibal, away from the tangled knot of sensation that feels dangerously close to love bubbling up in his throat. And so he tries to stop thinking entirely, and to throw himself headfirst into the rising waves of his intoxication.

Will doesn't know how to dance, not in the formal sense of the word; not in the way he's sure Hannibal and his *charming, beautiful* wife know how to dance, all premeditated steps and wide, sweeping arcs across a ballroom, but Will knows how to use his body. Will knows how to incorporate the rhythm of the music into the movement of his limbs, he knows how to pull Molly's body close to his as their feet tumble across the hard-packed earth; he knows how to wind his arms around her shoulders and lead her into a dizzy flurry of motion.

With the whiskey coursing like fire through his veins, whispering secret words into his ears, Will can't even feel the lingering tenderness in his torso or the aching of his much-abused wrists. He can't feel the shaking of his limbs or hear the ringing of the bell that is sinking even now somewhere into the deepest parts of him. He can't feel anything at all except a distant sort of euphoria: a sense that if he moves fast enough, if he keeps moving and doesn't stop, he'll escape his body completely. He can hear Molly laughing over the sound of the music and the roaring of the whiskey in his ears, he can see her eyes shining through the haze of torchlight and feel her hands growing tight against his sides. "You're really good at this," she tells him, and in response he slides his hands down to her waist and he lifts her up, spinning her among the dancers as the sound of her laughter peals out through the night like the bell that even now is sinking, sinking, sinking through the fathoms of Will's mind.

Will can hear the people around them cheering as he spins Molly faster, he can hear the people around them clapping and shouting as Molly's face grows pink and she presses her calloused hands against her face. He can hear it, but the awareness of it seems to pass to him through a haze of unreality. He isn't sure whether all of this is not actually a dream: he isn't sure that he won't wake up on the side of the road outside Redlands and find that all of this has been a figment of his imagination.

And so he keeps dancing. What else can he do? He keeps dancing with Molly until long after midnight, sharing nips of whiskey from her flask and laughing as their movements become increasingly disordered and unsteady. He keeps dancing with Molly until they have to keep their arms linked in order to stay upright, and Will can't seem to stop laughing.

In these moments, Hannibal Lecter seems as far away to Will as the remote and watchful Cassiopeia. In these moments, Hannibal Lecter seems to be something from another world entirely. Wally finds his way back to the dance floor and sighs at their shared state of drunkenness, guiding them back to the tent with a maturity well beyond his years.

"You two are embarrassing," he tells them, and Will and Molly burst into a peal of shared laughter at his words.

"I need to get back to my camp," Will slurs, thinking suddenly of the slim possibility that Hannibal might descend from his perch in the heavens to pay him a visit before sunrise.

“No way, Will!” Molly tells him. “You can’t walk back like this! Just sleep here, it’s no big deal, I’ll drive you back in the morning.”

Will listens to her words, and he thinks about Hannibal again. He thinks about how Hannibal rarely comes to see him two nights in a row, and he thinks about how very likely it is that at this very moment Hannibal is spreading his lovely, charming, smiling, beautiful wife out over silken sheets and pressing himself into her body. He thinks about how very likely it is that Hannibal isn’t thinking about *him* in this moment at all, and about how very likely it is that Hannibal won’t think about *him* again for several days. And so he makes a decision.

“Yeah,” he slurs. “Yeah, I’ll just sleep here.”

Molly gives him an extra bedroll, and he spreads it on the ground near the fire as he feels his legs sway beneath him. He still can’t seem to stop laughing. “Thanks Molly,” he says, and he nearly collapses on top of the bedroll as soon as it’s spread.

Will can hardly hear his own thoughts through the whiskey in his mind, but he finds that he can once again hear the ringing of the bell. He finds that he can once again feel its vibrations traveling through all of his limbs, resounding.

I’m not fortune’s fool, he thinks. *I’m Hannibal’s.*

+++

H.

To say that Hannibal is concerned would be an understatement of comedic proportions. On the contrary, Hannibal is not certain that a word exists in the multitude of languages he speaks to accurately convey what it is that he’s feeling in these moments. He’s going through the motions of making breakfast in his palatial kitchen through sheer force of will alone, propelled by the mechanisms of suspended, invisible strings. To an outside observer, he’s certain, nothing about this scene would seem out of the ordinary, but in truth Hannibal feels as though he is coming apart at the seams.

After leaving Jack Crawford’s house the previous evening, Hannibal had gone to Will’s camp and found it empty, had found it dark and devoid of life. He thought immediately of Mason Verger, and then of Will’s erstwhile plan to leave Redlands, and he wondered if perhaps he had been misled. He wondered if perhaps Will had fled Redlands after all, never to be seen again. “I won’t leave you,” Will had told him, and not even a full day had passed since those words were spoken. Had that vow been nothing more than a ruse? Was the translucent tenderness of the man behind Will’s mask nothing more than another layer of the lies Will Graham is willing to tell in order to get the things he wants?

Or had something else happened? Had Mason Verger returned to Will's camp earlier than expected and spirited Will away before Jack Crawford had the chance to speak to him? Was Mason Verger even now disposing of Will's precious, sacred body, feeding him to his infamous pet pigs with all the fanfare that attends a weekly collection of garbage by the city?

Where is Will? Hannibal asked himself, again and again as the hours passed, *Where is Will?*

The thought of Will being gone forever made the ringing in the space behind Hannibal's right ear grow deafening; the thought of Will being gone forever made the beast in Hannibal's mind fling itself in paroxysms against the bars of its cage. Hannibal sat alone in Will's campsite, trying to maintain control of himself amidst his rising sense of agitation. He had spent what felt like a lifetime waiting for Will to emerge out of the darkness like some fey creature from his nursemaid's old fairy tales, but it never happened.

Hannibal didn't know what to do in those hours of darkness: he didn't know whether to stay within the safety of his person suit or to give in at last to the yearnings of the beast in his mind. His overwhelming urge was toward destruction: toward descending upon Mason Verger's home and setting every part of it ablaze. His overwhelming urge was toward finding Mason Verger and cutting his torso in half, toward watching with seething pleasure as Mason Verger's steaming entrails spilled out onto the ground at his feet.

And yet, Hannibal did not do those things. And yet, despite the overwhelming urge to kill and maim, despite the tangy, nearly-forgotten taste of human flesh tickling at the back of his throat, Hannibal did not forget about the architecture of order and expectations. Hannibal did not break free from his person suit, he did not leave the shelter of the seams he'd woven years ago to protect himself from others as well as from himself. He did not release the beast from its cage.

Instead, he passed the night in silent, impotent anger, until the hours just before dawn, when he forced himself to go home at last. When he forced himself to shower, to go through all the motions of his old routine so that he could prevent himself from doing all the reckless, violent things he wanted so badly to do instead.

And that is what Hannibal is doing now, cooking eggs in the morning sunlight streaming through the open windows and trying to ignore the whispering of the beast in its cage. He is making breakfast for two, assuming that his wife is still asleep upstairs, but he realizes his mistake when he hears the front door open. He remembers the dance at the migrant camp the previous evening, and he supposes that his wife must have slept elsewhere, perhaps at the Verger estate. He listens to the sound of her footsteps moving down the hallway and into the kitchen, and he forces himself to smile at her where she stands in the doorway.

"Good morning, Alana," he says, and his voice is smooth and easy through the mouthpiece of his person suit. He sounds for all the world as though he is glad to see her, and not as though his mind is still miles away.

"Morning, Hannibal!" Alana says, and she makes her way to his side on quiet feet, raising herself up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "Is there coffee?" she asks, and Hannibal nods.

"I just made a fresh pot," he tells her, and Alana lets out a happy groan.

“Oh, thank *God*,” she says. “I need it this morning. The dance lasted so long Margot and I never went to sleep last night. We were cleaning up until half an hour ago! I hope you weren’t too worried - I tried calling last night, but I think you were already asleep. Sorry you had to sleep alone.”

“No apology necessary, Alana,” Hannibal tells her. His lips move without his mind consciously attending to the conversation.

“I had a *great* time,” Alana continues. “Margot did, too. So many people were dancing! I can’t tell you how good it was for was for the people in the camp.”

“How wonderful,” Hannibal says, and Alana hums around a mouthful of her coffee.

“Oh, that reminds me,” she says after a moment, “I wanted to tell you: guess who was at the dance?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea, Alana,” Hannibal says, feigning interest. “Who?”

“Will Graham!” Alana tells him, and, suddenly, Hannibal’s interest is no longer feigned. Suddenly, Hannibal’s entire body grows preternaturally still.

“Will Graham?” he repeats, forcing his voice to remain steady. “How extraordinary.”

“I know, isn’t it great?” Alana says, and she moves to stand beside him. “Margot pointed him out to me. He’s a really good-looking guy, isn’t he? I didn’t expect that. I don’t know what Jack was *thinking* of, accusing *him* of being a murderer! Are you *kidding* me? That guy isn’t a *murderer*! He spent the whole night dancing with a woman who lives at the camp, spinning her around like a belle of the ball. He hardly let go of her for hours. God, Jack is so *delusional*!” She pauses to take a sip of coffee, and then she directs a sly smile at Hannibal. “*Actually*, watching Will Graham with that woman reminded me of what you and *I* used to be like,” she says in a wry tone, and then she falls silent, her brow creasing. “Hannibal,” she says after a moment, “do you realize the eggs are burning?”

In truth, Hannibal had *not* realized that the eggs were burning. In truth, Hannibal had forgotten about the eggs entirely, and had been focused instead on visions of a moonlit dance floor where some wretched, faceless woman was writhing beneath the press of Will Graham’s hands on her unworthy body.

“Thank you, Alana,” he manages to say, and he pulls the eggs off the heat just in time to prevent their being rendered completely inedible. “That is wonderful news. And what of this woman Will Graham was dancing with? Do you know her?”

Alana trails after him as he begins to plate the eggs, sipping her coffee. “I do! She’s a wonderful woman. Her name’s Molly. She helped us plan the dance, actually. She’s been a godsend. She has a son named Wally, he’s a great kid. Apparently Will visits them all the time, eats dinner with them, helps Wally practice baseball, the whole nine yards. They’re a regular little family, Hannibal, and all this time Jack was trying to say Will Graham was a *murderer!* God, Jack is *unbelievable*. Rumor is there may even be wedding bells in the near future, and wouldn’t *that* be great? We could send Jack an invitation, *ha*!”

Something like smoke is crawling its way up the back of Hannibal's throat, making his breath draw short and his heart thud like a hammer against the walls of his chest. The ringing in the space behind his right ear has grown piercing, and the plates of eggs and toast in his hands are tinged with red. For a moment, Hannibal allows himself the indulgence of imagining what it might be like to kill this faceless woman with his bare hands, to roast her flesh over an open flame and feed her limbs to Will piece by piece.

Hannibal wonders how long Will has known this faceless woman and her son, he wonders how long Will and this faceless woman have been close enough to one another to elicit rumors of their pending nuptials. Hannibal wonders whether Will has been making love to this faceless woman for the last several months, months Hannibal had spent believing he had Will's attentions all to himself.

Is Jack right? he wonders, feeling a tar-black, sticky sense of betrayal begin to uncoil itself beneath his skin. *Am I allowing myself to be played by Will Graham? Am I so blinded by my preoccupation with him that I cannot see it?*

In all the hours Hannibal had spent alone and frantic in Will's campsite, in all the multitude of possibilities Hannibal had considered while he waited for Will Graham to appear out the darkness, he had never once imagined that Will might be gone because he was paying his attentions to someone else. In all the months that Hannibal has spent trailing after Will Graham's scent like a starving dog in search for a meal, he has never once considered the possibility that Will Graham might be falling into bed with someone else in the time he is not doing so with *him*.

Will Graham has touched another, Hannibal thinks. *What else has he done to her?*

Has Will pressed his face into the space where her neck meets her shoulder? Has Will clung to her like a sweet-smelling vine? Has Will gone soft and pliant beneath her, whispering her name into the darkness? Has Will allowed her to crawl across his body and to slide his cock inside her as if they were two carved pieces of stone fitting together? Has Will promised her that he won't leave her? That he will make a family with her? That he will care for her son and all the children they will make together?

The thoughts make Hannibal's skin crawl. The thoughts make the beast in Hannibal's mind hiss behind the bars of its cage; the thoughts make Hannibal's shoulders grow tight and the tar-black sludge of his betrayal move more swiftly beneath his skin.

Hannibal is angry.

"Hannibal," he hears his wife say, and he lifts his gaze to hers as through a fog. "Are you alright?"

"I'm wonderful, Alana," he hears himself say, and it sounds like the voice of a stranger. "I was simply lost in thought."

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W.

Will wants nothing more after Molly leaves him at his campsite than to crawl into his cot and sleep until sunset, but he cleans himself in the small stream near his camp and drags himself to the Verger Family Orphanage instead. He has a gift that he needs to give Abigail, and so he lets himself in through the wide double doors and stops by Margot's office, knocking on the door and watching as she turns to him from the window.

"Well, well, *well*, look who it is," she says with a smirk, "I didn't see expect to see *you* here today, Will."

"Oh yeah?" Will grits out, "Why's that?"

She gives him one of her Cheshire grins. "How are you feeling, Will?" she asks, stepping away from the window and gesturing for him to come inside. "You look like a little pale. Hungover, maybe?" she asks, but Will keeps his face blank. "Did you have fun last night?" she presses, unrelenting. "It sure *seemed* like you did. That was quite a show you put on, I had no idea you could be such a charmer."

"Goodbye Margot," Will says flatly, and he moves to step back into the hallway until he feels the sudden grip of fingers on his arm.

"In all seriousness though, Will," Margot says, her voice suddenly earnest, "may we talk privately for a moment?"

Will blinks, jarred by her sudden change in tone and demeanor, but he nods. "Yeah," he says. "Sure Margot, we can talk." He steps out of the doorway as Margot presses the door closed behind him, and then he settles himself into one of her wide chairs, blinking against the sunlight pouring in through the window. Margot sits down in the chair beside him, and silence hovers between them for several moments. The room is so still that Will can hear the ticking of the grandfather clock on the far side of the room. Eventually, Margot draws in a long breath.

"Okay, first things first," she says. "Abigail isn't here."

Will feels himself sit up straighter in his seat, he feels the cloying grip of anxiety claw at his throat. "What happened?" he asks, and Margot sighs.

"She had another fight with some of the other kids," she says, "worse than before. It happened overnight. She hurt her wrist, so Doctor Chilton sent her to the hospital so their overnight doctor could take a look."

Will rises to stand, his heart thudding in his chest. "Is she okay?" he asks. "Why are the other kids always picking on her? Why don't you *do* something? Why-"

"*Will*," Margot says sharply, "please sit back down." Will feels his eyes narrow, but when he studies Margot's face he finds that her concern is genuine. "Will, *please*. I know you're worried," she says, "but Abigail is *fine*, I promise. We can talk about the bullying later, but there's something I need to say to you first."

The combination of his hangover, his exhaustion, and the piercing worry for Abigail form a tangled, pulsing knot at Will's temples, and he presses his fingers against his eyes. "*Jesus*, Margot," he grits out, "what could possibly be so important?"

Margot draws in a long breath. "You may want to sit down for this one, Will," she says, and Will crosses his arms over his chest.

"Try me," he says flatly, and Margot leans forward in her seat, folding her hands and meeting his gaze.

"Alright," she says, and then she clears her throat. "Will," she says slowly, "what exactly are you doing with Hannibal Lecter?"

Will feels his entire body go still, he feels his eyes grow wide and a sensation akin to the shattering of dishware somewhere in the far reaches of his mind. He slumps back down into the chair behind him, and Margot gives him an apologetic look.

"Told you," she says mildly, and Will resists the urge to groan. He is far too tired and far too bitter and far too hungover to be having this conversation.

"I don't know what you mean Margot," he grits out. "I haven't seen Doctor Lecter for months."

Margot raises an eyebrow. "You're a good liar, Will," she tells him, "but it won't work on me. Unfortunately for you, I am *intimately* aware of what it's like to be in love with a Lecter. I know *all* the signs."

Will forces himself to stay still, he forces himself not to draw in a sharp, disbelieving breath at her words or to hiss at the piercing stab of jealousy in his gut. Instead, he keeps his voice steady. "You and Doctor Lecter have -" he begins, but Margot cuts him off.

"Not him," she says quickly, "the *other* Lecter."

Will feels his eyes grow wide, and he thinks of the smiling woman on the platform. "*Alana* Lecter?" he asks, and Margot nods.

"The very one," she says. "Trust me, Will: Hannibal is *all* yours."

"No he isn't," Will bites out, and then he curses himself immediately for the slip. He's too tired for this. Margot raises her painted eyebrows and hums.

"I know the feeling," she says quietly, and Will presses two fingertips against the bridge of his nose. His head still feels like it's full of shattering dishware.

"So are you and Alana Lecter-?" he begins, but Margot cuts him off again.

“Only in my dreams, Will,” she says. “Even *if* Alana knew how I felt, and even *if* she reciprocated, she’s far too morally scrupulous to *dream* of infidelity. Not like her *husband*, it would seem.”

Will keeps his face still. In truth, he’d hoped that Alana Lecter *was* having an affair with Margot, if only because it would serve to make the smiling woman on the platform seem a little less perfect. However, it seems that her perfection is untarnished, and that her relationship with Hannibal remains unchallenged.

How unsurprising, Will thinks grimly.

“Will,” Margot says after a moment, “you still with me?”

“You think I’m having an affair with Hannibal Lecter,” Will states flatly, and Margot rolls her eyes.

“Will, I don’t *think* you are, I *know* you are,” she says, and Will presses his hands against his face, letting out a long breath.

“What on earth gave you *that* idea, Margot?” he asks, and Margot scoffs.

“Like I said, Will, I know *all* the signs of being in love with a Lecter,” she tells him. “The frequent staring off into space, the accidentally bumping into walls, the constant look of crippling fear that you’ll never be good enough… I could go on for hours, *really,*” she says, and Will feels his stomach shrivel as Margot smirks, “but suffice to say: I *know* Will, I see it all over you.”

Will leans forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees and staring at his folded hands.

This is what happens when I neglect my mask, he tells himself, *I leave myself vulnerable.* Margot clears her throat beside him.

“I asked Hannibal about you recently, you know,” she says, and Will feels his entire body stiffen. “He was *all* innocence. To hear him tell it, you two are little more than strangers. I knew he was lying, though.”

Will draws in a tight breath. He decides that he is too exhausted to dance around this conversation anymore.

“Okay Margot, I’ll play along,” he says. “Assuming that I *am* having an affair with Hannibal Lecter, which, to be clear, I’m *not*, what would be the point of this conversation?”

Margot leans forward in her seat, drawing Will’s hand into hers and meeting his gaze. “I saw you dancing with that woman at the migrant camp last night, Will,” she says, her eyes steady. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but she adores you. Are you… What are you doing with her?”

Will licks his lips and lets out a long sigh. “Nothing, Margot,” he tells her. “We’re not together, honestly, and we never have been. Last night was a mistake. I drank too much. I’ve

known that she was attracted to me as long as I've known her, but we've never… We won't. It wouldn't work."

Margot studies him with a crease between her eyebrows and an assessing look in her gaze. "Okay, Will," she says after moment. "Okay. Just… be careful with her, okay? Maybe let her down sooner rather than later. From what I know of Hannibal Lecter, I... suspect he's not the kind of man who likes to *share*."

Will scrubs a hand over his face. "*I* have to share *him*," he bites out, unable to hold back the words or the surge of bitterness that accompanies them, and Margot gives him a look of feigned sympathy.

"Finding it hard to set boundaries when you're fucking a married man, Will?" she asks, and Will glares at her.

"I wouldn't know, Margot," he says sharply, "because I'm not *fucking* a married man."

Margot laughs and squeezes his fingers. "Don't worry, Will, your secret's safe with me," she says. "Whatever it is you're doing with Hannibal Lecter is none of my business. And honestly, I hope you keep doing it, because that just means I get to spend more with time with Alana. But please - remember what I said, okay? If not for your own sake, then for that woman's sake."

Will feels his eyebrows draw together. "Margot," he says slowly, "what exactly is it that you think Hannibal would do? Kill Molly in a fit of jealous rage?" He scoffs at the hyperbole. "You're being ridiculous. *If* I were having an affair with Hannibal Lecter, which, to be clear, I'm *not*, I promise you he wouldn't care what I do with my free time *or* who I choose to spend it with. I'm just a two-bit migrant, after all. I'm hardly a suitable partner for the *inestimable* Doctor Lecter."

Margot stares at him, pressing her painted lips together and remaining silent for several moments. "Be that as it may," she says slowly, "can you do me a favor and just promise not to mention her to him? She has a *kid*, Will. She shouldn't get mixed up in whatever it is the two of you are doing."

Will heaves a sigh at this, and he rubs his hand against his forehead. He knows that Margot is right, and he tells himself he'll talk to Molly at the earliest opportunity.

"Okay Margot," he says. "*If* I were to see Hannibal Lecter in the future, and *if* we were having an affair, which we're *not*, I promise you I wouldn't tell him about Molly."

Margot tightens her fingers around his. "Thank you, Will," she says, and then she rises to stand. She lets out a breath. "We can talk about the bullying later, Will. You probably just want to go see Abigail now, don't you?" she asks, and Will lets out a rough huff of a laugh.

"Yeah, I'm not sure I'm up for another conversation with you at the moment, Margot," he says, and he rises to stand as well, lifting Abigail's gift and settling it against his side. Margot links her arm through his the way she did on the very first day they met, and they make their way across her office in silence.

“Will, Will, Will,” she says when they reach the door, “never in all my years did I think I’d see *Hannibal Lecter* stray from his marriage. You sure know how to make a mess of things, don’t you?” she asks, and Will forces a smile. He knows that her words were spoken in jest, but in truth they feel like knives to his stomach.

That is what you do, Will, Hannibal had told him, all those months ago, *you shatter things and leave it to others to pick the pieces.*

“Yeah, Margot,” he says, stepping out into the hallway, “yeah, I guess I do.”

A Soft-Hearted Man

Chapter Notes

> Annnnnnnd, we're back! I had a lovely, rejuvenating trip and I'm excited to be back to this story :). (I also spent some time daydreaming about an idea for a possible fic after this one, so we'll see what happens with that!)
>
> Thanks so much for the feedback on the last chapter! I know it was a bit of a doozy to leave you with, so in this chapter I'm giving you some angst and drama and smut as a reward for your patience ;). I really love this chapter, both because of the drama and because there's a part of it where I feel like I got as close to the amazingly pretentious dialogue of the TV show as I am likely ever to get LOL, and I had a lot of fun writing it. I hope that all of you enjoy it too!!

H.

Hannibal leaves his house after breakfast, and his anger does not lessen as the hours pass. His mind is still on Will. His mind is still on the faceless woman in the migrant camp and her son, on the knowledge that Will has been building a family with them while simultaneously wrapping Hannibal around his little finger.

Hannibal's thoughts are on betrayal. His thoughts are on Will's silver tongue, on Will's ability to weave tempting lies into a web of hidden knots. His thoughts are on Will's mask, and on the very real possibility that the man hiding behind it has been playing Hannibal for a fool for nearly six months.

I spoke to him of trust, Hannibal thinks, *and yet he did not offer it in return.*

Hannibal feels like a banked flame, all smoldering coals lying in wait for the fuel required to blaze anew. Everything he thought he'd known about the truth of Will has been brought into question. All those glimpses of the man behind Will's mask, all those slender slips of translucent tenderness - had they been a ruse? Just another facet of Will's mask? Just another way of drawing Hannibal closer? Of using him for his own ends? Were the glimpses of the man behind Will's mask in fact just a different mask entirely? Just a different way of ensuring that Hannibal would protect him against Mason Verger so that he could build a family with the faceless woman in the migrant camp?

Hannibal thinks of sirens, and he thinks of Will's wide eyes in the darkness. Why is he surprised, he asks himself. After all, he's known from the beginning that Will is a liar. He thinks of Will's parted lips, of Will's beautiful face like a piece of sculpted glass reflecting light. He wonders if the glimpses of what he'd imagined to be the man behind Will's mask were in fact nothing more than the melodies of an age-old siren song: enchanting, irresistible, and leading inevitably to a piercing death upon the rocks. He wonders if he has been a fool.

Hannibal can find no peace from the thoughts that plague him, and it is only through a monumental force of effort, through the groaning and creaking of the long-standing marionette strings of expectations, that he is able to go on about his day at all. It is only through the architecture of nearly seven years of order and routine that Hannibal is able to pay any mind to anything at all besides the feelings of betrayal needling constantly beneath his ribs.

"And Frederick brought one of the orphans back overnight as well," Sutcliffe tells him, "one that's been here before. Her name's Abigail Hobbs. Her previous visits were all for malnutrition, but this time-"

"Abigail Hobbs has been re-admitted?" Hannibal asks, and Sutcliffe nods.

"I know, I was surprised too," he says, "but it's not for malnutrition this time. She looks a lot more healthy overall, actually - whatever Frederick's been doing over there must be working. This time she's here for a sprained wrist. I bound it up last night. It's nothing serious, I think it should heal in a few weeks, but I told Frederick it would be a good idea to keep her here for a few days so she doesn't end up re-injuring herself playing with the other kids."

"A wise decision," Hannibal says, and he wonders how long it will take for Will Graham to come calling.

"Yeah, well, I have my moments," Sutcliffe says with a laugh. "You should check on her today, though. I told her how important it is to get some rest, but you know how she is. She likes to pretend to be asleep until you leave the room and then get up and follow you."

"I will certainly keep an eye on her," Hannibal tells him, and he means it.

In fact, Hannibal means to keep a close eye on Abigail's room all day, and he means to descend upon any *erstwhile visitors* who may choose to slink in with a plastered-on smile and a silver-tongued mask with all the single-mindedness of a bird of prey, armed with the sort of knowledge that can be wielded as a weapon. And so he visits Abigail's room as soon as Sutcliffe has left for the day, and he watches her little face grow blank at his approach.

"Good morning, Abigail," he greets, and she twines her fingers into the blankets beneath her.

"Hi Doctor Lecter," she says slowly. "Is Mister Will going to visit me today?"

"I don't know, Abigail," he says with a mildness that is all feigned, "I've not spoken with Will for some time."

"Oh," Abigail says, and Hannibal can tell by her voice that she does not believe him.

“How does your wrist feel?” he asks, and Abigail sits up straighter.

“It’s fine,” she says. “It’s not a big deal. I can still move my fingers.”

“Perhaps you’ll let *me* be the judge of that?” he chides, and she blinks at him as he settles into the chair beside her cot. “Are you experiencing any pain?” he asks.

“A little bit,” she tells him, “but not much. I can still visit with Mister Will when he gets here.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “May I see your wrist, Abigail?” he asks, and her eyes gleam as though she will refuse him. He wonders, suddenly, if Abigail can tell that he is displeased with Will, and he makes his face a blank mask.

“Abigail,” he scolds, and she extends her left arm. Hannibal takes it with careful fingers, examining the binding before releasing it gently. Doctor Sutcliffe has done an exemplary job with the splint; he does not need to make any adjustments. “Do you mind if I inquire how you came by this injury, Abigail?” he asks, and Abigail turns her gaze to the doorway.

“I told you it was no big deal,” she says, and Hannibal lets out a displeased sound.

“Abigail,” he scolds again, and she draws in a breath. She begins to pick at the fabric of her blanket, and Hannibal notices that her hands are shaking.

“I - it -” she stutters, and Hannibal hums.

“Abigail,” he reminds her, “you said yourself that it’s wrong to lie.” He watches her small face fold into a frown, watches her shaking hands grow still. He finds that he is curious what she is going to say.

“I… got in a fight,” she says at last, and Hannibal nods encouragingly.

“I see,” he says. “And why were you in a fight, Abigail?”

Abigail shifts, twining her fingers in the blanket and blinking rapidly. “It wasn’t my fault,” she says, and Hannibal tilts his head, studying her.

“I didn’t ask whose fault it was, Abigail,” he says pointedly, “I asked why you were involved.”

Abigail lets out a breath, and her little face twists into a scowl. Hannibal is surprised by the force of the expression, and by the hint of steel glinting behind it. “I was in a fight because they didn’t have any right to say the things they said,” she tells him, and she tightens her hands into tiny fists.

“Who are ‘they’, Abigail?” Hannibal asks, and Abigail’s eyes gleam.

“The stupid, stupid kids at the orphanage,” she whispers.

“I see. And what did they say, Abigail?” he asks, and he watches in fascination as her small shoulders begin to shake. She is silent for several moments, her face creased and her gaze fixed on the doorway opposite. She seems to have no intention of answering Hannibal’s question. “Abigail,” he chides, and she lets out another sharp breath.

“They said my dad was a cannibal,” she grits out, and Hannibal feels surprise move like a breeze through tall grass in his mind. Of all the things he had expected that Abigail might say, *this* was not one of them.

“A *cannibal*?” he repeats. “Do you know what that word means, Abigail?”

“*Yes,* I know what it *means*,” she hisses, and Hannibal raises an eyebrow.

“What does it mean, then?” he asks, and he watches her small face twitch. She doesn’t respond, so he presses her again. “Abigail,” he says, and she looks up at him with very wide eyes.

“It means a person that eats other people,” she says in a hushed tone.

“And *was* your father a cannibal, Abigail?” he asks, and Abigail moves her gaze back to the door. She takes a deep breath, and her shoulders stop shaking. Her face goes carefully blank.

“I don’t feel very good, Doctor Lecter,” she says after a moment. “Maybe you should leave me alone and let me sleep instead of asking me so many questions.”

For a moment, Hannibal considers chiding her for her rudeness. For a moment, Hannibal considers pressing her for more information about her late father and his alleged propensity for the consumption of human flesh. But then, he decides to let it pass. Hannibal has heard the things that Abigail has said, as well as the things that she has *not*: Abigail has *not* said that her father was *not* a cannibal, and Hannibal is certain that her evasion was deliberate. Hannibal is certain that her evasion was as good as confirmation.

What a fascinating piece of information, he thinks, followed immediately by: *I wonder if Will Graham knows*. Hannibal wonders what Will Graham would think if he knew that his precious Abigail Hobbs is the daughter of a man who consumed human flesh. He wonders what Will would think if he knew that *Abigail* has likely consumed it, too; or that Hannibal himself has consumed it, for that matter.

Hannibal studies the strange little girl in the bed, and he marvels at the odd sense of kinship he now feels with her. He marvels at the fact that they have two very rare things in common: a shared history of cannibalism, and a shared fixation on one Will Graham.

How very curious, Hannibal thinks. *How very curious indeed.* And instead of chiding Abigail for her rudeness, her leaves her be.

“Of course, Abigail,” he tells her, “I’ll leave you to your rest.”

The rest of the morning passes with still no sign of Will, and Hannibal finds that the more time he spends waiting for Will to arrive, the more angry he becomes at his absence. He finds

that the more time he spends waiting for Will, the more unbearable he finds the thought of Will putting his hands and mouth on some unworthy person, the thought of Will whispering Hannibal's name in the darkness knowing full well that it is nothing more than a siren song.

Hannibal is *angry* at Will, so angry that he is able to resist the desperate burning of his own desire, so angry that he's able to ignore the deep-rooted longing unfurling leafy fronds up out of his stomach and into his throat.

Hannibal wonders if Will had assumed he would remain oblivious to the existence of this faceless woman. He wonders if his relationship with Will was only meant to last until Mason Verger gave up the chase, if his relationship with Will has had a duration from the moment of their first conversation in the rose garden. He wonders if Will had fallen into bed with him knowing that the experience had an ending before it even had a beginning, and the thought makes his lips curl, the thought makes the beast press searching fingers against the bars of its cage.

Oh, Hannibal is angry. Oh, Hannibal is envious. Oh, Hannibal is hungry to lay claim.

Hannibal is beginning to believe that Jack Crawford was right, and that he has been played for a fool by Will Graham all along.

What does one do, Hannibal wonders, *when faced with such temptation toward destruction?* What does one do when he sees order all around him and wants nothing more than to shatter it into pieces? Wants to make it *burn*? Wants to make it crack down the middle the way he feels that *he* is cracking, from anger and from longing alike?

What is the name for the sensations that have taken root beneath his skin?

What is the name for the experience of guiding oneself knowingly toward the edge of a precipice, and wanting nothing more to throw yourself off of it?

What is the name for the feeling one gets when, after hours of smoldering anger and the piercing sting of betrayal, you are standing in the hallway of a hospital, guiding a batch of fresh-faced nurses on a tour, and suddenly you see the face of your fickle, silver-tongued, many-faced *liar* of a beloved emerge from the crowd like a vision from a dream? What is the name for the feeling one gets when your breath stops short at the sight of them, *despite* the fires of anger still roaring in your chest? *Despite* the fact that you know you cannot trust them?

What is the name for the way your body seems to incline itself closer to theirs beyond the mechanisms of your own control?

For that is the situation in which Hannibal now finds himself, staring across the brightly-lit foyer of the hospital at the vision of Will Graham illuminated by afternoon sunlight. It's Hannibal's first glimpse of Will in what feels like a lifetime, and he devours every detail like a man dying of hunger. Will's dark hair is tousled and windswept (did he walk all the way here?), there are dark circles beneath his eyes (did he forego sleep in favor of making love to that faceless woman all night?), his hands are clutching a wrapped package (what could be

inside of it?). Hannibal licks his lips, and he realizes that one of the nurses has been speaking to him.

“Doctor Lecter?” he hears her say. “Are you alright?”

Hannibal turns his gaze back to the four gathered faces and he smiles. “Yes, Sarah,” he tells her through the mouthpiece of his mask, “I am perfectly fine, thank you. I was simply surprised to see that a friend of mine is here. He looks a little lost, I think. Please excuse me for a moment while I offer him my assistance.”

The nurses all smile and nod obligingly, as Hannibal had known they would, and he steps away from them and across the crowded foyer to where Will Graham is standing, watching his approach with a blank expression. Hannibal steps closer to Will, and he thinks of sirens and of Odysseus. He thinks of the call of temptation leading inevitably to death on the rocks, and he wonders what it will take for him to finally stuff his ears with wax.

+++

W.

Will’s hangover has transformed itself into a state of full-body exhaustion by the time he reaches the hospital, and he wishes had simply gone back to his camp the moment he lays eyes on Hannibal. Hannibal looks especially good today, all long limbs and broad shoulders, all golden skin and strong hands. Will licks his lips at the sight of him, and he watches Hannibal approach with the same sort of unease he imagines a dormouse must feel when it’s been caught out in the open by a curious housecat.

Will is exhausted, and he has no idea how he’s going to be greeted by Hannibal here in full view of the public eye. He’s exhausted, and the vision of the smiling woman on the platform is still fresh in his mind. He is well aware that he has no place in *this* world, the world of Hannibal’s *real* life, and so he decides to proceed with caution. He decides to follow Hannibal’s lead for this conversation, and to hope that it is over quickly.

“Hello, Will,” Hannibal greets, and Will swallows. Something in the sound of Hannibal’s voice sends a shiver down Will’s spine.

“Hello, Doctor Lecter,” he says, and he keeps his voice carefully blank. He finds that he can’t meet Hannibal’s eyes, not here, not with his mask in such a state of disrepair, and so he looks away instead. He looks away across the foyer and sees that they are being watched by a group of pretty nurses, all of whom gawk at Hannibal as though he is some Hollywood heartthrob.

Which, Will supposes darkly, *I guess he could have been, if he’d wanted to.*

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Will?” Hannibal asks him, and Will tears his gaze away from the nurses.

“Ah, I’m here to see Abigail,” he grits out. “Can you tell me where to find her?”

Instead of answering his question, Hannibal gives him an odd smile. “How are you, Will?” he asks. “You look a little tired. I assume you had a late night?”

Will feels his brows draw together. “Yeah, you could say that,” he says carefully, and then he licks his lips. “But back to Abigail - where is she?”

Will hears Hannibal draw in a breath, but any words he might have spoken are silenced by the sound of another voice.

“Doctor Lecter?” it says. It’s a woman’s voice, and when Will looks away from Hannibal he sees that the group of nurses has moved across the foyer and come to stand beside them. “Do you mind introducing us to your friend?” the woman asks, and Will feels his entire body grow tense. Hannibal, meanwhile, gives the nurses a brilliant smile, and he seems all too happy to oblige them.

“Certainly,” he says. “It would be my pleasure to introduce you. Ladies, this is Will Graham. He’s a migrant.”

Will swallows, and he feels a strange, piercing sensation at the base of his spine. *It’s the truth*, he reminds himself: *it’s the truth, I shouldn’t be surprised to hear it spoken*.

And yet, somehow, he *is* surprised. He *is* surprised to hear himself described in such terms by a man who only days ago had cradled him in the darkness and whispered to him of trust. Hearing Hannibal speak of him this way gives Will a strange sense of whiplash, a feeling as though he cannot keep his balance. The nurses all shift their gaze to him with a look of fascination, as though he is some sort of exhibit in a zoo, and Will moves his gaze to the floor. He wishes that he had the full protection of his mask in this moment. He’s never seen this side of Hannibal before, and tendrils of unease are uncoiling themselves deep in the pit of his stomach. He’s not sure how he’s going to make it through the rest of the conversation.

“Will is here to visit Abigail Hobbs,” Hannibal continues. “She’s one of our youngest patients, an orphan who lives at the nearby Verger Family Orphanage. Will is attempting to look after her… for the time being, at least.”

Will presses his lips together, and he feels his skin grow clammy with sweat. The nurses all let out a surprised sound at Hannibal’s words.

“Isn’t that right, Will?” Hannibal asks, and Will keeps his eyes on the floor. He finds he can’t make his lips move to form a response.

“That’s… nice,” one of the nurses says awkwardly, trying to fill the silence, and Will resists the urge to grimace at her tone. He wants to leave. He wants to pull himself behind the shelter of his tattered mask and tell them all to go fuck themselves, Hannibal included, but instead he stands frozen, and he feels like an insect pinned to a corkboard as they stare at him.

“I think that’s great,” one of the nurses says after a moment, and Will feels himself twitch when she places a hand on his arm. “It’s always such a blessing to meet soft-hearted men.”

“Is that what Will is?” Hannibal asks, his voice brimming with amusement. “A soft-hearted man?”

“Absolutely,” the nurse replies. “I can always tell with people, Doctor Lecter. This one puts on a tough face, but deep down he’s gentle as a lamb.”

Will turns his gaze back to the floor, and he feels the tendrils of unease in his stomach flower into a field of full-blown panic: first Margot had known about his affair with Hannibal, and now *this* ?

Can this woman really *see* him, he wonders? Has his relationship with Hannibal made his mask so useless that anyone and everyone can now see the man cowering behind it? Can see the man that Will has fought for years to hide from public view?

I need to pull myself together, Will thinks, *I never should have let it get this bad*. *Why did I let it get this bad?*

“Did you hear that, Will?” Hannibal asks him, turning his gaze to him with a smile. “You’re as gentle as a lamb.”

“He *is*!” the nurse insists. “Look at those eyes. You can always see the truth of a person in their eyes,” she tells the other nurses sagely. “Will is a gentle soul, I’m sure of it. Not like *you*, Doctor Lecter,” she adds with a wink, and Hannibal smiles his most charming smile as the nurses titter with laughter.

Will shifts on his feet, and he realizes that his entire body has begun to vibrate with discomfort. He realizes that he cannot make it stop. He *knows* that this conversation is harmless, he *knows* that the nurses are only speaking in jest, and yet their scrutiny feels like sharp little insect legs prickling over his skin. Hannibal is openly flirting with them, treating Will like he’s little more than an acquaintance (but isn’t that what he is, *really?*), and Will can’t help but feel that he’s stumbled out of a dream and back into the sharp-edged world of reality.

After all, isn’t this conversation the *reality* of his relationship with Hannibal? Isn’t this conversation the *reality* of the smiling woman on the platform? Isn’t this what Will has *always* known would happen if he ever let the man behind the mask come out? Hasn’t he *always* known that nothing ever comes from trust but heartbreak?

Will feels his throat move convulsively at the thought, and he reminds himself that he shouldn’t be surprised by any part of this. He reminds himself that he has only ever been a mangy dormouse for a fat, happy housecat. He reminds himself that the man behind his mask has always been a fool.

“*You can trust me*,” Hannibal had told him, only days ago. “*You can trust me*.” And the worst of it is, Will had nearly believed him.

“Can you please tell me where to find Abigail, Doctor Lecter?” Will grits out, and Hannibal turns to him.

“No time for pleasantries then, Will?” he asks, and the nurses all titter again. “Certainly you can stay and chat a bit longer? As I recall, you were just getting ready to tell me about your late night.”

Will keeps his eyes on the floor, and he tries to ignore the fact that the fronds of panic have now grown so tall and lush that they are tickling the back of his mouth. He tries to stutter out a response to Hannibal’s question, but he finds that the words won’t come. He reaches desperate fingers for the tattered edges of his mask, but they’ve grown so ragged he cannot grasp them, he can only feel them slip through his fingers like frayed threads.

“What’s in the package?” one of the nurses asks. “Is it a gift for the orphan girl?”

“It’s yarn,” Will hear himself say. “Abigail likes string.”

“*Really*?” one of the nurses asks. “That’s strange. Most girls like dolls.”

“Yeah, or candy,” another one says, and they laugh as one again.

“Abigail’s not like most girls,” Will hears himself say, and the nurses all fall silent, shifting on their feet and looking to Hannibal for guidance on how to handle this strange, unpleasant man. Will can feel the heavy weight of Hannibal’s eyes on his face, but he doesn’t look up. Instead, he keeps his eyes fixed on the floor.

Silence hangs over the group for several moments, taut and uncomfortable, until at last Will speaks again. “Doctor Lecter,” he forces himself to say, “would you *please* be so kind as to tell me where I can find Abigail Hobbs?”

Hannibal doesn’t respond for several moments, but finally he speaks. “She’s in Room 14C,” he says, and Will nods.

“Thank you, Doctor Lecter,” he tells the floor, and then he gathers Abigail’s gift close to his chest and steps away.

When Will reaches Room 14C, he greets Abigail with a smile and watches with a dull sense of heartbreak as she beams at the gift of colored yarn he’s brought for her. Abigail’s childlike joy at the gift is piercing against the memory of the nurses’ laughter, and Will finds himself wondering about Abigail’s future. He finds himself wondering who Abigail will turn to when she’s older and continues to face contempt for her strangeness. Will wonders who will look after Abigail once he himself has left Redlands once and for all; he wonders who will care for the strange, sad girl who likes string better than dolls, who likes the taste of freshly-caught fish better than candy. Will finds himself wondering who will pick up the pieces of Abigail’s little life once he has shattered them on the floor.

“Abigail,” he hears himself say, “there’s going to be a carnival in town next week. If you promise to eat all your meals and do everything Doctor Lecter says, I’ll take you, okay? Margot already said you could go.”

Abigail looks up from the skein of colored yarn in her lap, and she grins from ear-to-ear. “Really?” she says. “You will? Will there be a Ferris wheel?”

“Yes,” Will hears himself say, “I think so. Do you want to ride a Ferris wheel, Abigail?” he asks, and she nods.

“*Yes*!” she cries. “I’ve always wanted to, but my dad was too scared. Will you ride it with me, Mister Will?”

“Of course I will, Abigail,” Will tells her, and she beams at him.

“Thank you, Mister Will,” she says, and Will forces a smile. He watches Abigail run her fingers through the yarn, attempting a slow cat’s cradle with her tender wrist, and he thinks about the tragedy of their situation. He thinks about the particularly unique variety of tragedy that is Abigail’s little life, of the particularly unique variety of tragedy that is *his* life: the tragedy that comes from wanting so desperately to trust the wrong person. He thinks about the reality that is pressing down upon them with every passing moment: that all of this is temporary. That soon, all of this will be shattered on the floor, and the only thing left will be the glinting, jagged memories.

“You don’t have to thank me, Abigail,” he chokes out, and Abigail’s small face creases in a frown.

“Mister Will,” she says, “are you okay?”

“Don’t worry about me, Abigail,” Will manages to say, and he presses his fingers against his eyes and leans forward in his seat. He is so *tired*.

“Are you sure?” Abigail asks, and Will feels a sharp flare of guilt at the worry he’s causing her.

“I’m fine Abigail,” he says, “I promise. What about you, though? Margot says you got in a fight with some of the other kids again? What happened?”

Abigail studies him for a moment, seeming to hesitate, but then at last she speaks, extending her small, splinted wrist and placing her hand on top of his. “It wasn’t a big deal, Mister Will,” she tells him. “We weren’t fighting, we were just playing.”

Will feels his brows draw together. “Really?” he asks. “Margot said-”

“Miss Verger wasn’t there,” Abigail interjects. “It wasn’t a fight, Mister Will. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Will presses his lips together, feeling tendrils of doubt and uncertainty uncoil in his stomach. “Are you *sure*, Abigail?” he asks. “You know you can tell me the truth.”

“I’m sure, Mister Will,” she tells him, and then she smiles. “You don’t have to worry about me, I promise.”

“Okay Abigail,” Will says slowly, and then he gives her a small smile. “Why don’t you tell me what you learned in your lessons yesterday?” he asks, and Abigail squeezes his hand.

“I learned about stars,” she tells him, and Will raises his eyebrows.

“Oh yeah?” he says. “Did you learn any of the constellations?”

Abigail turns her gaze up to the ceiling. “I learned Taurus and Orion and the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper,” she lists, “and lots of others too.” Will feels his face spread in a smile. He is proud of her, so proud of her that it hurts.

“Did you have a favorite?” he asks, and Abigail nods.

“I like Cassiopeia best,” she says, and something splinters in the innermost chamber of Will’s heart. He thinks about that night in the orange grove, about the road leading to Redlands, about spreading himself out on his back beneath the open sky before he’d ever met Abigail, before he’d ever met Hannibal, before he’d ever begun to pretend that he could be anything to anybody besides an occasional and unwanted companion to a silent, unknowable queen in the sky.

“Me too, Abigail,” he says after a moment. “Me too.”

+++

H.

Hannibal does not go home at the end of his shift. Instead, he settles into his office under the guise of doing paperwork, and he stays there until the hallways grow quiet and empty. He stays there until the clock reads nearly midnight, studying Will Graham in the courtyard in his mind.

“What is it that you want from me, Will?” he asks, and the Will in his mind looks away.

“I want the same things from *you* that *you* want from *me*,” he says, and Hannibal hums.

“You don’t know the true depths of the things I want from you, Will,” he says in a low tone, and the Will in his mind shrugs.

“Hey, *you* asked the question,” he says mildly.

“Why do you continue to lie to me, Will?” Hannibal asks, and the Will in his mind gives him a small smile.

“Sometimes lies are the highest form of truth, don’t you think, Doctor Lecter?” he asks. “There can be multiple versions of the truth, but a lie: now, a *lie* has *integrity*. It has *intimacy.* A *lie* serves a *purpose*.”

“And what *purpose* do your lies serve, Will?” Hannibal asks, and the Will in his mind spreads his beautiful face into a grin.

“Maybe I just want to see what’s going to happen,” he whispers, and then suddenly he moves his gaze to a spot above Hannibal’s shoulder. “Looks like you have a visitor, Doc,” he says softly, and then his image shatters.

“You okay in here, Hannibal?” a voice calls, and Hannibal looks up from the surface of his desk to see that Doctor Sutcliffe is standing in his doorway, staring at him with a concerned smile. “You’ve been in here for hours now. Is there anything I can help you with?”

Hannibal blinks through the fog in his mind and he meets Sutcliffe’s gaze. “No, Doctor Suctliffe,” he says, “thank you, I’m perfectly alright.”

“You sure?” Sutcliffe presses, “I know that paperwork can be brutal.”

“I’m sure, thank you,” Hannibal tells him, and then he licks his lips. “Doctor Sutcliffe,” he says, “do you know how long ago Will Graham left the hospital?”

“He’s still here, as far as I know,” Sutcliffe says, his eyebrows raising. “Should he have left by now? Yikes, Hannibal, I’m sorry. Last I saw he had fallen asleep in a chair in Abigail Hobbs’ room. I figured-”

“It’s alright, Doctor Sutcliffe,” Hannibal hears himself say, “it’s perfectly fine, I was merely curious. Have you taken your break? If you’d like, I can cover you for a time. I still have some paperwork to complete, and I think some time away from it would suit me nicely.”

Sutcliffe blinks at him from the doorway, looking uncertain. “Are you *sure*, Hannibal?” he asks. “I’m not going to say no, but really, it’s not necessary.”

“It would be my pleasure, Doctor Sutcliffe,” Hannibal tells him, and Sutcliffe’s face splits into a grin.

“Well alright, Hannibal,” he says. “In that case, I think I’ll run home. I didn’t have time to pack anything this afternoon. I’ll be back in an hour or so. If you need any of the nurses, they’re usually in the break room this time of night.”

“Wonderful,” he says, and Sutcliffe nods.

“Thanks again, Hannibal,” he calls. “I’ll check in with you when you get back. See you in an hour or so.”

“Enjoy your meal,” Hannibal tells him, and then he sits in careful silence as the minutes pass, calculating the exact amount of time that it will take for Sutcliffe to reach his office, for Sutcliffe to gather up his jacket and his car keys and to make it out into the parking lot. And then Hannibal rises to stand, and he makes his way to Room 14C in search of Will Graham.

The hallways are still and quiet, the only sign of life coming from Hannibal's movement across the polished tile. When he reaches Abigail's room, he hovers in the doorway and assesses the scene before him. Will is no longer asleep, he finds; instead, Will is standing at the window, looking up into the night sky. Abigail is asleep in her cot, curled beneath the blankets like a tiny pale shadow.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal murmurs, and Will casts a quick glance at him over his shoulder.

"Hey there, Doctor Lecter," he whispers, and Hannibal steps into the room.

"Are we no longer on a first-name basis, Will?" Hannibal asks, feeling the banked flames of his anger resurge, and Will shrugs.

"Sure we are, Hannibal," he whispers. "Just wasn't sure about the proper protocol here. Anyway, I should probably go. I've stayed too long as it is."

"You don't have to leave, Will," Hannibal whispers, and Will turns him to face him fully, leaning back against the windowsill and sliding his hands into his pockets.

"It's probably best if I *do* though, don't you think?" he asks softly, and Hannibal hears the sound of a faint ringing in the space behind his right ear.

"Is there somewhere else you need to be, Will?" he asks, thinking of the faceless woman in the migrant camp. "Is there somewhere else you're expected to be at this time of night?"

"*Somewhere else I'm expected to be*," Will repeats, and he huffs a quiet laugh. "What an idea, Doctor Lecter. Where else would I go?"

"You have everywhere to go," Hannibal murmurs, and Will peers at him through the darkness.

"Maybe we should continue this conversation somewhere else, Doctor Lecter," he murmurs. "Abigail is sleeping."

"Very well, Will," Hannibal tells him, and he steps aside as Will moves out into the hallway. Hannibal follows him on silent feet and Will turns to face him, raising his eyebrows in an unspoken question.

"Perhaps we could speak in my office," Hannibal says lowly, and Will nods.

"Whatever you say, Doc," he tells him. "Lead the way."

And so they make their way down the hall side-by-side, and they are nearly to Hannibal's office by the time Will speaks again.

"Would you rather that I *stay*, Doctor Lecter?" he murmurs. "Is *that* the issue? You could have just asked me nicely then, you know. You could have just said *please*."

Hannibal feels himself go still, and he turns to face Will through the dim light of the hall sconce. "I was merely curious what other obligations you might have at this time of night,

Will," he says in a low voice. "We've known each other for some months now, and yet I find I still know very little about you."

"Likewise, Doctor Lecter," Will says, and then he shrugs. "Don't you think that's for the best, though?"

Hannibal feels a thrill of anger course through him, feels as though they are back in the rose garden trading volleys over high stone walls, feels as though they are strangers once more. He finds that he can't bear it, and so he steps closer to Will in a smooth motion.

"Will," he says, and something in his voice makes Will go still. "If you recall, the last time we saw each other I said that you could trust me. Do you trust me, Will?"

Hannibal watches the movement of Will's throat as he swallows, he watches the movement of Will's pink tongue as he licks his pretty lips.

"I trust *you* as much as *you* trust *me*, Doctor Lecter," he murmurs, and then he shifts his gaze to Hannibal's mouth, moving imperceptibly closer. "I think that might be as far we're ever going to get." He is so close to Hannibal now that Hannibal can feel the warmth of his breath on his lips.

"And is that far enough for *you*, Will?" Hannibal asks, breathing in the scent of Will's skin and listening to the distant call of a siren song unfurling in his ears. Moments pass, and he finds himself once again entranced, once again mesmerized and unable to pull himself away. It seems that despite his anger, despite his betrayal and the knowledge that he is willfully charting his vessel closer and closer to a piercing death upon the rocks, Hannibal still cannot find it within himself to stuff his ears with wax. Will meets his gaze.

"It feels like far enough right now," Will whispers, and Hannibal reaches for his face. Will draws in a breath at the movement and then he surges forward, wrapping his arms around Hannibal's torso and pressing himself up into a kiss. Their lips meet, and their union is siren song and swan song all in one: temptation and acceptance of the inevitable end.

Destruction and rebirth, Hannibal thinks, *what a captivating thought*. But then he finds that there is no more room in his mind for thinking, nor for anger and betrayal or destruction and disorder. Instead, he finds that there is room only for *Will*, for the scent of Will's skin, for the taste of his lips and the warmth of his body.

"Will," he murmurs, and Will presses his face into the space where Hannibal's neck meets his shoulder.

"Yeah, Hannibal?" he asks, and Hannibal snakes a possessive arm around his waist.

"Will you come to my office?" he murmurs, and Will nods.

"Yeah," he whispers, "yeah, I'll do that."

They don't speak as they move together, nor as they pass into Hannibal's office and Hannibal locks the door behind them. They don't speak as Will presses Hannibal back against the

wood of the door in a rough movement, rattling the hinges and making Hannibal's breath draw short in his chest. They don't speak as Will begins to paw at the buttons of Hannibal's shirt, parting the fabric and pressing searching fingers against the skin beneath it. They don't speak as he presses his lips to Hannibal's neck and moves his fingers to Hannibal's trousers.

"How do you always smell so good, Doc?" Will whispers at last, wrapping clever fingers around Hannibal's erection, and Hannibal can hardly hear him through the sound of the waves thrashing against sharp rocks in his ears.

"I should ask the same of you, Will," he manages to say, and Will huffs out a laugh.

"You happen to have any lubricant in here, Doctor Lecter?" he asks, and Hannibal swallows around the sharp surge of arousal he feels as Will twists his wrist in a practiced motion.

"In the cabinet," he grits out, and Will presses another kiss to his neck.

"Back in a jiff, Doc," he whispers, and Hannibal stands frozen as Will pulls away from him, as Will saunters over to the cabinet of medical supplies and pulls it open with a lurch. Will's voice is all calm self-possession, but Hannibal can see that his hands are shaking where they sift through the supplies, knocking bandages and bottles to the floor in their heedless search. Hannibal watches with a distant sort of fascination as the glass shatters and the contents of the bottles spread out across the floor. He considers telling Will where to find what he is looking for, but instead he stays silent, watching Will make a mess of his meticulously organized supply cabinet. He thinks the sight is oddly beautiful. At last, Will pulls a jar of lubricant from the highest shelf, and he turns to face Hannibal with wide eyes.

"I think this might be easier if you sit on the edge of your desk, Doc," he says, and Hannibal finds that he can only nod. Hannibal finds that he can only make his way across his office and seat himself as Will lopes toward him looking like a piece of light through sculpted glass.

Will reaches him in two strides, and he sets the lubricant down beside Hannibal's framed medical license and his ornate lamp with a quiet *tap*. Then, he steps between Hannibal's legs.

Will meets Hannibal's gaze, moving his fingers back to his trousers and pressing them down. Hannibal shifts so that the fabric can slide past his hips, past his knees and down to the floor, and then Will opens his own trousers as well, reaching for the lubricant without looking away from Hannibal's eyes. Hannibal is rocked by trembling waves of anticipation at the sound of the lid unscrewing, and he draws in a sharp breath at the press of Will's fingers against his entrance.

"*Will*," he whispers, still fixated on the sight of Will's gleaming eyes, "is there anyone else?" The words escape his lips without his conscious mind intending to speak them, and Will goes very still. They stare at one another for several moments, panting against their shared arousal and the overwhelming influence of their closeness. Will moves his eyes over Hannibal's face, his brow creasing.

"What do you mean?" he asks, and Hannibal cups his fingers around Will's jaw, rubbing his thumbs over the delicate cheekbones.

“Is there someone in your life other than me, Will?” he asks, and he watches the shape of Will’s throat as he swallows; he watches the small movements of Will’s lips and the darting, rapid flash of uncertainty in his eyes, there and gone so quickly it is as if it had never been. *He has made his decision*, Hannibal thinks.

“No, Hannibal,” Will tells him in a quiet voice, “there’s no-one else. There’s never been anyone else.”

Hannibal swallows Will’s lie as a bitter draft, and he presses his lips together as he moves his hands over Will’s face. “Very well, Will,” he says, and then he pulls Will close to him again, feels his skin sing at the touch of Will’s fingers, feels the waves of his arousal drowning out the voice in his mind that is warning to him retreat, that is warning him to draw himself away from the rocks or face extinction. Will kisses him with all the skill of a nymph, and then he moves his fingers in a hypnotizing rhythm, pressing him open until it is difficult for Hannibal to breathe. Hannibal presses himself back against those fingers, he presses his knees against Will’s waist and leans on his hands so that he can study Will in these moments. Will’s face is flushed pink, his eyes liquid-bright and magnetic, his body glowing in the moonlight pouring in through the window. Hannibal can feel his fingers dislodging papers and pens spread out behind him, knocking them to the floor beside the shattered glass and the scattered pills and liquids, but he can’t look away from Will’s face. He’s never seen anything so beautiful.

At last, Will removes his fingers, and he spreads the lubricant over his cock as he pulls Hannibal’s hips close over the edge of the desk. Hannibal keeps his eyes open as Will presses inside of him, holding his gaze, and he feels a shift like a dam-break when Will moves his slick fingers to wrap around his cock. He holds Will’s fever-bright gaze as Will begins to move inside of him, pairing the motion of his hips with the clever twisting of his fingers, and Hannibal breathes through the coursing swell of pleasure that fills his limbs like a tidepool.

“Will,” he says again, unable to hold the words inside of him, “is there anyone else?”

Will continues moving, and he doesn’t look away from Hannibal’s eyes.

“No, Hannibal,” he whispers, “there’s never been anyone else for me but you.”

He lies so beautifully, Hannibal thinks, and then he closes his eyes.

The Island of Calypso

Chapter Notes

I struggle with Abigail's character in the TV show for many reasons, but one thing I always enjoy is how she calls Hannibal out right to his face. I struggle with Molly's character in the TV show for many reasons, but I always enjoy how she is one of the very few characters who just comes right out and says what she means. In honor of that, I give you this chapter :).

Thanks so much to everyone who has bookmarked and/or left feedback on previous chapters - I'm so happy you're enjoying the story!

W.

Dawn is spreading rose-colored fingers over the mountains in the distance by the time Will makes it back to his camp. He feels like he's been walking for a lifetime, his skin coated with sweat and his legs trembling with weariness and the final, bitter dregs of his hangover. He stumbles down to the creek and wipes away the remnants of his journey and the unexpected lovemaking that preceded it with hands that are shaking from weariness and some other sensation he refuses to name. He drinks what must be a gallon of water and then collapses down onto his cot when the last of his strength finally leaves him, trying to ignore the shadows of circling carrion birds in his mind. Heat is already beginning to build in the cabin, heat from the sun and from Will's own body, so he strips himself naked and sprawls out on top of the blankets. He stares up at the aluminum ceiling and tries to resist the urge to gorge himself on memories of what took place just before he left the hospital. He tries to resist the overwhelming urge to surrender his mind to memories Hannibal, to memories of Hannibal's voice and the press of his fingers on Will's face. Will tries to resist these urges, and he fails. The memories surge forth unbidden, flinging themselves into Will's grasp like tightly uncoiling branches, and he finds he has no choice but to reach for them.

Will remembers with a dreadful sense of clarity the moments that passed just after Hannibal's release, those quickening, fleeting moments when both their bodies hung suspended in the web between pleasure and the inevitable return of its absence. Will had stood so close to Hannibal in those moments that it felt like they were sharing the same breath. Will's body moved without his conscious control, guiding his face into the space where Hannibal's neck meets his shoulder and leading him to wonder if his perhaps heart were a magnet, pulled inevitably towards some essential element tucked away in Hannibal's core. The office was in

a state of disarray around them, broken bottles and scattered papers spread like confetti at their feet, but Hannibal hardly seemed to notice the mess.

“Will,” he’d murmured, “thank you for telling me the truth.” His voice was a low rumble close against Will’s ear, and it sent a shiver down Will’s spine.

“I wouldn’t lie to you Hannibal,” he whispered, his words muffled against the skin of Hannibal’s neck. “What would be the point?”

And then Hannibal had reached broad fingers for Will’s face, moving him away from the safety of the space where his neck meets his shoulder and forcing him to meet his gaze.

“‘*What would be the point*,’ indeed,” Hannibal murmured, and then he ran a gentle thumb over Will’s cheekbone. The touch of Hannibal’s hands on his face made Will’s skin prickle, made his heart begin to race again anew.

I don’t want to leave, he thought, unable now to muzzle the immediate and chiming chorus in his mind. *I don’t want to leave*.

But as always, Will wanted things that were impossible, and he felt himself forcibly heaved back into the world of pleasure’s absence, into the world of sharp-edged reality, as soon as Hannibal pulled away.

“It’s time for you to go, Will,” Hannibal said, and it had taken a monumental force of effort for Will to acknowledge the words.

“Yeah,” he’d said at last, licking his lips and shrugging through the mouthpiece of his tattered mask, “yeah, I think so too.”

And so he’d left. And so he’d walked the lonely miles back to his camp as the sun rose over dun-colored mountains in the distance until he found himself *here*, staring up at the aluminum ceiling in his little cabin and asking himself about the uneven stitching on the border between truth and a lie.

Should he have told Hannibal about Molly, he asks himself, despite his promise to Margot that he wouldn’t?

Should he have told Hannibal about Molly despite the fact that what he’d said instead was the *truth*, as honestly as he had ever spoken it?

Should he have told Hannibal about Molly despite the fact that she had never been anything more to him than the possibility of what might have been, in some other world?

Should he have asked Hannibal why he posed that question in the first place?

Should he consider the possibility that Hannibal cares for him as more than just a source of entertainment?

Should he consider the possibility that Hannibal harbors *true* feelings for him, despite the existence of the smiling woman on the platform? Despite the existence of the innumerable

multitude of reasons that Will is and always will be unsuitable to love?

Or is he simply deluding himself again? Is he simply allowing himself to cling to the tattered threads of hope that he should have long ago tossed into the nearest fire?

Who is Hannibal *really*, behind the mask he wears? Is he the husband of the smiling woman on the platform, the charming doctor flirting with nurses in a brightly-lit hospital foyer, or is he the shadow of the great horned beast who moves with Will in the darkness?

Will falls asleep with the sense that his cabin is filling with water, and he wakes up onboard a raft coursing down the River Styx. He is surrounded by darkness on all sides, and he is alone in that darkness. The only light he can see is shining from the windows of the house by the sea, a golden and unreachable beacon on a distant shore. He feels the press of fingers against his skin and he knows without looking that it is the great horned beast. He closes his eyes against the touch. He's not alone in the darkness anymore.

"What happened, Will?" the beast whispers, and Will can feel fingers pressing against the gaping maw of torn flesh and cracked bone that has become his chest.

"I let myself get too close," he whispers, and the great horned beast chuckles.

"Very close indeed," he murmurs, and then he moves his lips to Will's ear. "And yet still you want to get closer, don't you?" he asks, and Will chokes back a sob.

"Yes," he whispers, "I do."

The great horned beast lets out a hum at this, and it sounds so much like Hannibal that Will grows still, Will finds himself frozen when the great horned beast begins to move, when the great horned beast sinks searching fingers into the fleshy, bloody valley of his chest.

"Remarkable boy," the beast tells him, "I do admire your courage."

"*Hannibal*," Will chokes out, and he feels a horrible wrenching sharpness, he feels the tug of unimaginably powerful fingers, and he opens his eyes to see that the great horned beast has ripped his heart out of his chest, that the great horned beast is holding the still-beating organ in his broad fingers and studying it with a curious expression. "Give it back," Will whispers, and the beast looks at him with a smile.

"It's already mine," he tells him, and then he spreads his sharp teeth to take a bite.

Will is wrenched back to wakefulness by the sound of pounding on his cabin door, and the combination of the overwhelming heat and the visceral imagery of his dream sends him lurching over the side of his bed and retching out the contents of his mostly empty stomach. It's only then that he hears the shouting.

"Will!" a voice calls. "*Will!* Are you in there? Are you okay? Can I come in?"

It's Molly, Will thinks, and he feels his disappointment well up within him like a tide. Despite himself, despite his better judgment and the sense that he should have learned his lesson by now, he'd hoped as always that it would be Hannibal.

“Yeah, Molly, I’m fine,” he calls, his voice hoarse and uneven. “I’ll be right out, just give me a minute.”

Will scrubs his hands over his face, swallowing around the acrid taste in his mouth and rising to stand. He dresses quickly, stepping around the puddle of bile beside his cot and opening the door. Molly stands beneath him, and her face goes pale at the sight of him.

“*Will?*” she says, but Will hardly hears her. He’s noticed that the sun is setting.

“What time is it?” he asks, wondering how long he’s been asleep, and Molly moves aside to give him room.

“It’s almost seven,” she says, and she turns to face him as he steps down from the cabin. “Will, where have you *been*?” she asks. “Wally and I have been waiting all day. I was afraid… I thought…”

“I’m sorry, Molly,” Will says, and he steps away from her. “I think I must still be a little hungover.”

“*Jesus,* Will, I’m sorry,” she cries. “If I’d known you were such a lightweight I wouldn’t have let you drink so much.”

Will scrubs his hands over his face again. “It’s not your fault, Molly,” he says. “I don’t think I’m up for dinner tonight though, if that’s why you came. You and Wally can have my share.”

Molly draws in a breath at this, and Will feels a ripple of unease move up his spine. He takes a moment to look at her, to *truly* look at her, and he sees that she is twining nervous fingers in front of her stomach. He sees that there is a look of strained determination on her face, and that her eyes are fixed on a point somewhere above his left ear. He feels his shoulders grow tense, and he knows immediately what she’s doing here.

“That’s not why I came,” she says after a moment, and Will presses his lips together.

“Molly-” he begins, but she speaks before he’s able to continue.

“Do you mind if we take a walk, Will?” she asks, and Will resists the urge to grimace. He’d known after his behavior at the dance that this conversation was coming, but in truth he’d thought he would have more time to prepare for it. He’s still reeling from the effects of his dream, still reeling from his uncertainty and from his longing for Hannibal. He feels rubbed-raw and ragged, like the slightest breath of wind might burn him to ashes, and he’s not at all certain that he’ll be able to handle this discussion with the kind of grace that it deserves.

“Yeah Molly,” he says in a defeated tone. “Let’s take a walk.”

Molly is quiet while Will rinses his mouth and face, and she remains silent for several minutes as they walk. It’s only once they’ve reached the small stream near Will’s camp that she draws in an unsteady breath and clears her throat. “Will, I need to ask you something,” she says, and her words fall like a lead weight in Will’s gut.

“Sure Molly,” he says. “You can ask me anything.”

She scuffs the sole of her worn boot in the dirt at their feet and keeps her eyes on the ground. "I…" she begins, and then she stops walking. "Wally and I are leaving, Will," she tells him, and Will halts too, meeting her gaze. "A cousin in Florida offered to let us live in her cottage. She said she'd help me get a job in town and get Wally enrolled in school. I'd be *crazy* to turn her down."

"Yeah," Will agrees, "you *would* be crazy to turn her down."

Molly draws in another breath, steeling her shoulders and pressing her lips together. "So what I wanted to ask you," she says, "is whether or not you would be willing to come with us."

Will flexes his fingers at his sides, considering how best to respond. "Molly-" he begins, but he's already taken too long, and she lifts a hand in a jerky movement when he speaks.

"Stop," she says, and Will feels a hot flash of guilt at the tremble in her voice. "I think I know what you're going to say."

"Molly," he says, "you-" but she shakes her head.

"You don't have to explain yourself, Will," she grits out. "I get it. I understand, I always have. I just - I hoped, you know? I've always known I wasn't good enough for you, but I had to try. I thought that - I hoped that-" her voice catches, and she presses her face into her hands. "I've been lying to myself," she whispers.

Will listens to her speak, and he feels his heart give a brittle pang. Her words about him are so similar to his own thoughts about Hannibal that he can't resist the urge to move closer to her, to comfort her through the maelstrom of emotions he knows she is experiencing.

"Molly," he says quietly, and he moves a gentle hand to her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"It's not - don't apologize," she says through her fingers. She has begun to cry, and the sight of her trembling shoulders sends needling tendrils of pain down the back of Will's throat.

That is what you do, Will, Hannibal had told him, all those months ago. *You shatter things and leave it to others to pick up the pieces.*

"Molly," Will says, "it's not your fault. You're an incredible woman, and Wally's a great kid. I don't deserve-"

"*Stop it*, Will," Molly hisses, and Will falls silent. She moves her hands away from her face and blinks at him through her tears. Her eyes are very bright.

"You don't have to make excuses," she tells him, "I know there's someone else."

Will feels his entire body grow still, and he swallows against the curdling sea of horror now rising in his gut.

Jesus Christ, he thinks, *does* everyone *know? Can* everyone *see?*

"Molly," he manages to say, "there's no-" but she cuts him off again.

“Please don’t lie to me, Will,” she says. “I’ve known it for a while, but I kept hoping you’d change your mind.”

Will presses his fingers against the rough surface of his trousers, tries to maintain a steady cycle of breath. He feels dizzy. “It-” he says, but Molly interjects again.

“I was delusional,” she tells him, and then she turns to face him. “I don’t know *who* she is,” she says, “but whoever she is, she’s got you under her spell something *fierce*.”

Will blinks at her, trying to make sense of her words, trying to weave them together into something comprehensible, until at last he arrives at the source of his confusion: ‘*She’,* he thinks with a dawning sense of clarity. *Molly thinks it’s a ‘she’*.

Molly looks away, scuffing her boot in the dirt again. “And I suppose the dancing the other night was just because you were *drunk*, huh?” she asks. “Drunk and looking for a good time?”

Will presses his lips together. His head is still spinning. “Molly,” he tries, but she shakes her head and presses her hands against her face again.

“I should be *happy*,” she cries. “I’m finally going to get to settle down. I’m finally going to be able to give Wally the life he deserves. I’m finally going to be able to sleep in a real house instead of a fucking *tent*. I should be *celebrating*, but instead all I want to do is find this broad who’s holding you back and slap her in the face.”

Will is taken aback by her words, and by the force of the sentiment behind them. He stays silent, genuinely speechless, until at last she lets out a rough breath and shakes her head with a quiet huff of a laugh.

“Hell,” she mutters, “I got *mad* there for a second.”

Will clears his throat, licks his lips. “It’s okay, Molly,” he says slowly, and she scoffs.

“Yeah, I know it’s *okay*, Will,” she says, “believe me, I know.” Fresh tears are streaming down her face again, and Will presses his fingers against his eyes, asking himself if there is a single person in the world who doesn’t eventually regret coming to know him.

“We can’t help who we fall in love with, Molly,” he whispers after a moment, and he feels a movement like the shifting of tectonic plates beneath his feet.

Love, he’d said. The word had slipped out of his mouth before he’d been able to stop it. *Love*.

“No, we can’t,” Molly says in a low voice, and then she lets out a long, tired sigh. She uses the sleeve of her worn shirt to wipe away her tears. “Who is she, Will?” she asks. “Can you at least tell me that much?”

And then Will thinks of Hannibal, of long limbs and golden skin, of sharp teeth and pressing fingers. He thinks of tangled rose brushes and brightly lit gardens, of houses by the sea and men cooking dinner inside of them. He thinks of the great horned beast, and of all the things

that he so desperately wants but knows that he will never have. He tells Molly the truth as best as he is able.

“It’s no-one you know, Molly,” he whispers. “It’s no-one you know.”

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H.

Hannibal takes to avoiding his office in the days that follow his ill-advised rendezvous with Will Graham. The room has been set to rights, of course: all the broken bottles and spilled liquids have been replaced, the floor swept and mopped, the papers cleanly stacked and the pens tidily stored. Nevertheless, Hannibal cannot avoid the sense that his sanctuary has been fundamentally changed; he cannot avoid the sense that it has become a different place after Will Graham’s presence there. Hannibal cannot help but imagine Will within his office everywhere he looks, as though Will’s scent has absorbed into the painted walls, as though Will’s essence has spread itself through the wood grain of Hannibal’s desk and woven itself into the spidery lace of his curtains. The floor seems to have shifted beneath Hannibal’s feet, well-trodden pathways now treacherous and unfamiliar. And although there is no outward evidence to suggest a change, Hannibal knows that it is not the same room it was before. He can feel the change as surely as one can feel the touch of a breeze on their face, but he does not know how best to react to it. His office was meant to be his haven: it was meant to be the place where he could shield himself against the influence of the outside world. It was meant to be a reflection of his own mind, of the perfection of order and control he has maintained over the many long years since he fled Florence. But now the specter of *Will* lives there, vibrant and inescapable, and so Hannibal takes to locking the door and leaving it empty. He doesn’t know what else to do.

Meanwhile, the days after Will’s visit seem to blend together into one borderless, interminable fog, with little to distinguish one from the next besides the gradually increasing gulf of Hannibal’s longing. By now, the experiencing of longing for Will has become so distressingly familiar to Hannibal that it feels like a fundamental part of his being; it has become so familiar to Hannibal that he can hardly remember now how he filled his days before Will Graham stumbled into his life. His longing for Will greets him first thing in the morning upon waking, and it follows him every night into his dreams. It follows him into his garden, into his dining room, into the rooms of ailing patients. It follows him on trips to the post office, to dinner parties, it follows him as he moves over and inside his wife’s body. It spreads through him like smoke, touching everything, until even the courtyard in his mind is hung heavy with its thick, cloying haze. Hannibal’s longing for Will saunters into the courtyard that has remained empty since Will’s last visit and it brushes idle fingers over rose petals. Hannibal’s longing tilts its face up into the sun and thinks that it would like to stay here a while. Hannibal’s longing for Will traipses through the darkest corners of his mind, coaxing the beast in its cage, whispering lingering temptations through the bars.

What if you found that Molly woman and snapped her neck in the middle of the night?

What if you cut her body into quarters and served her flesh to Will over a bed of fresh greens?

What if you showed Will the truth of who you really are?

The truth of what *you really are?*

What if you left Redlands with Will?

What if you made a different life with Will?

A better one?

Destruction and rebirth, Hannibal's longing whispers, day after day, *what a captivating thought.*

The suggestions are all too tempting to Hannibal, a siren song of a different sort, but the whispered voice of own longing sounds so much like the Hannibal of Florence that he is careful not to linger on the questions being asked. Instead, he reminds himself that he's known from the beginning that Will Graham is a *liar*; he reminds himself that he's known from the beginning that Will Graham is likely just a cockroach with a very hard shell. He reminds himself that he cannot trust Will Graham, that he will *never* be able to trust Will Graham. He reminds himself that, in this situation, the best action has been, and will remain to be, *inaction*. He tells himself to stay the course, but staying the course does nothing to soothe the hollow ache that has carved itself into the space beneath his ribs, and it does nothing to assuage the needling fury he feels at the thought of some wretched woman gasping at the touch of Will's hands and lips upon her unworthy body.

And what is Hannibal to do, then, in the months that come?

Share Will with the Molly woman?

Continue their relationship in full awareness of Will's lies and of his infidelity?

Such thoughts set a tar black sludge to moving beneath Hannibal's skin, they set his longing to roaming and to whispering again. *Don't you think it would be best just to kill her?* His longing asks, tracing fingers over trellises grown riotous with white bougainvillea. *Pull the problem up by the roots, the way you would an unwelcome weed in this garden. It's been a while, certainly, but you haven't lost your taste for it, have you?*

"Are you okay, Doctor Lecter?" Abigail asks him one afternoon, wrenching him abruptly away from unspoken considerations of unspeakable violence. He gives her a steady smile through the mouthpiece of his person suit.

"Of course, Abigail," he tells her, "I've never been happier."

Abigail frowns at this, and a thin line forms between her eyebrows. She does not believe him. *Clever Abigail,* Hannibal thinks, and he tells himself that he will need to be more careful.

“When is Mister Will coming back?” she asks, and Hannibal’s smile doesn’t falter.

“Who knows what the future holds, Abigail?” he replies. “I certainly don’t.” Her small face curls into a frown. She is unwilling to accept his evasion.

“Then do you know what the *past* holds?” she presses. “Do you know *why* Mister Will left last time? He doesn’t usually leave without telling me goodbye.”

“I don’t know why Will left the hospital, Abigail,” Hannibal says, “but I do know that it’s rude to leave without saying goodbye. Perhaps you should tell Will so the next time he visits. Perhaps it’s a lesson he could stand to learn.”

Abigail continues to study him, her brow creased and her face tight, until at last she looks away. “Okay Doctor Lecter,” she mutters, “next time Mister Will visits, I’ll tell him.”

In truth, Hannibal has wondered more times than he can count when Will might choose to make his next appearance at the hospital, but he doesn’t tell this to Abigail. In truth, while Hannibal’s anger and his betrayal may be powerful enough to prevent him from calling on Will Graham himself, they are not enough to prevent him from spending every passing moment of every interminable day wishing that Will would return. And so he waits, and waits, and waits, and waits, until at last Will *does* return, nearly five days after his last visit, and Hannibal greets his arrival with the sense of an impending storm. He hears Will before he sees him, and he stands in the hallway outside Room 14C breathing in the scent of Will’s skin where it wafts through the open doorway.

“Of course I’m not mad at you, Abigail,” he hears Will say, “I’ve just been really busy, that’s why I haven’t visited you for so long.”

Liar, Hannibal thinks, and a savage curl of anger uncoils in his stomach as he steps into the room. The sight of Will after so many days without him sends a sensation akin to electricity sparking beneath his skin, but he is careful to remain outwardly at ease.

“Hello, Abigail,” he greets. “Hello, Will.”

Will springs to his feet, his expression unreadable, and Hannibal notes the dark circles beneath his eyes. *Sleepless nights with the Molly woman,* he thinks, and the beast in his mind lets out a dark rumble in its cage.

“Afternoon, Doctor Lecter,” Will says, stepping away from Abigail’s cot. “I was just saying hi to Abigail. Don’t let me interrupt. I can go, if that would be bes-”

“That won’t be necessary, Will,” Hannibal interjects, and he watches the movement of Will’s throat as he swallows.

“Right,” Will says. “Right. Okay then, I’ll just… get out of your way.”

Hannibal watches with an impassive expression as Will moves to stand by the window, turning his back on Abigail’s cot and looking out at the rose garden, lit by mid-day sun.

Hannibal feels his fingers flex at his sides, anxious to touch, but he forces himself to tear his eyes away.

“How are you feeling today, Abigail?” he asks, and she blinks up at him from her cot. She tries to affect an air of indifference, but her performance is not very effective. Hannibal knows that she is watching him, scrutinizing his every action. *Clever Abigail,* he thinks.

“I’m feeling very good, today Doctor Lecter,” Abigail says slowly, sliding her gaze back to Will. A nurse passes through the doorway carrying a clipboard, and Hannibal steals another glance at Will. He watches as Will shifts, slightly, and casts a quick glance over his shoulder. Their eyes meet, and Hannibal’s fingers move unconsciously against his sides, sparking with electricity.

For all the days that Hannibal has spent silently lamenting Will’s absence, he is now beginning to wonder if perhaps Will’s *presence* is an altogether worse sort of suffering. To have Will so near to him and yet so far out of his reach is a particularly cruel form of torture for Hannibal. He cannot touch Will, not here; he cannot speak to Will, not here, at least not with the sort of words that he would like to use. He can only steal quick glances at the slippery and gleaming near-stranger at the window, and wonder who he really is. He tries to focus on the task at hand, but in truth he is scarcely aware of it, so fixated is he on the thought of Will at the window, on the thought of lithe shoulders and slender waist, of wry smirks and impenetrable masks. Hannibal wants to *possess* Will, unequivocally and openly: he wants to lay a claim to Will that no other soul dare question. Instead, he is forced to stay still as the nurse prattles out a cheerful greeting to Abigail, and he finds himself imprisoned by the suspended strings of expectation. They are steadfast against his longing, constructed as they were to withstand the temptations of a man who was not so impeccably self-controlled as Hannibal is now. His limbs may tug against the bearings, testing just how much pressure they can sustain and still hold, but his mind simultaneously warns him to be still. The whispered voice of his longing is losing patience, but his sense of self-preservation remains steadfast.

So much suffering and indecision over such an easy thing, his longing tells him. *Just kill the Molly woman and be done with it.*

You have no idea who that man really is, his sense of self-preservation warns him. *You would risk your life, your* freedom*, on a mask?*

Hannibal looks back to Abigail and finds she has been watching him. He gives her a blank smile. “May I see your wrist, Abigail?” he asks, all ease and nonchalance, and Abigail frowns at him as she raises her injured arm. Hannibal takes it gently, studying the splint and the movement of her fingers. She is healing well.

“How’s it look, Doctor Lecter?” the nurse asks him, and Hannibal sends what he knows is a dazzling smile in her direction.

“It is healing beautifully,” he says. “We are fortunate, Miss Wright, to be treating such an ideal patient.” He watches the nurse’s face spread into a smile, and he looks again at Abigail. “Unlike some of our patients,” he continues, “Abigail is a very good listener. In fact, you’ll find that she is *always* listening.”

“Is that *right*?” the nurse says in a tone of exaggerated interest, placing her hands on her hips and tilting her head down to the cot. “*Are* you a good listener, Abigail?” she asks.

Abigail gives Hannibal a steady look before she turns her eyes to the nurse. “Yes,” she says quietly. “I’m a good listener.”

“And what *other* things are you good at, Abigail?” the nurse asks, her voice gently encouraging, and Hannibal feels his eyes creep back to Will again before he forces them away.

“I’m good at playing cat’s cradle,” Abigail says slowly, “and I’m good at knowing when people are *lying*.” She turns her eyes to Hannibal as she says it, and the nurse lets out an awkward laugh.

“My, *my*, Abigail,” she says in a strained voice, “that’s a very special skill!”

Hannibal meets Abigail’s gaze, and he gives her a warning look. Her face is very still. Her performance is becoming more effective; she is learning, honing her craft, and if her perceptiveness didn’t pose a risk to Hannibal, he thinks he might be proud of her progress.

“Abigail is very perceptive,” he tells the nurse after a moment, sending her another dazzling smile, and he watches as her pretty face flushes pink.

“Sometimes I think there just aren’t enough perceptive people in the world, Doctor Lecter,” she says, and he hums.

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Miss Wright,” he tells her. “All is well, Abigail,” he continues. “You’ll be out of your splint in no time.”

“Thank you Doctor Lecter,” she mutters, and she presses her lips together as Hannibal gestures to the nurse.

“Shall we move on to the next patient, Miss Wright?” he asks, and she beams at him.

“I would *love* to, Doctor Lecter,” she says, and she flushes a pretty shade of pink again as they move together towards the door. They are halted by the sound of a voice.

“Why don’t you say goodbye to Mister Will, Doctor Lecter?” Abigail asks, her voice unusually forceful. “You told me it’s rude to leave without saying goodbye.”

The nurse raises her eyebrows, and Hannibal taps a finger against the fabric of his trousers as he grows still. *Clever Abigail,* he thinks. He turns slowly, and he sends what he knows to be a gracious smile in the direction of Will’s back.

“Goodbye, Will,” he says, and he watches Will turn, he watches Will press his back against the windowsill in a now-familiar motion. Will is backlit by the afternoon sunlight streaming in through the open window, the air around him heavy with the scent of roses, and Hannibal thinks that he looks radiant, like some archangel captured in stained glass.

“Always a pleasure, Doc,” Will says, and they are both are still for a beat, holding each other’s gaze. Will’s face is entirely blank, his sculpted features unmoving and his eyes impenetrable. Hannibal can’t seem to keep his fingers still. At last, he turns away, and he steps out into the hallway, the nurse close behind him.

Liar, he thinks. *My beautiful, fickle, silver-tongued* liar.

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W.

Will can’t stop thinking about Odysseus, and about the island of Calypso. He can’t stop thinking about Odysseus, trapped and staring out over the sea, bound by a prison made not of chains but of a force far more insidious: the caprice of a lover who did not need him, but did not want to let him go. For as much as Odysseus may have longed for escape, escape was an impossibility for him as long as Calypso had him within her clutches. Odysseus fallen into bed with a goddess, a creature far more powerful even than he, and such mistakes come at a high price.

In the hours just before dawn, as Will lies awake and staring up at the aluminum ceiling of his cabin, listening to the prowling of the great horned beast just outside his door, he thinks that he can relate to Odysseus in that sense. He thinks that he, too, has found his way into the bed of a lover far more powerful than he, and that his mistake, too, has come at a price. After all, hasn’t he felt again and again the pull to leave Redlands, and hasn’t he found himself again and again halted in his retreat? Hasn’t he always known that it wasn’t really Jack Crawford that kept him here? Hasn’t he always known it wasn’t really Mason Verger, or even Abigail? Hasn’t he always known that it’s *Hannibal*, and Hannibal *alone*, for whom he stalls his departure? Hasn’t he always known that’s it’s *Hannibal*, his very own Calypso, who binds him to Redlands as surely as Odysseus was bound to that island?

What he should *do*, he knows, is *leave.* What he should have done from the beginning, he knows, is *leave.* But like Odysseus, leaving is an impossibility for Will, and it will remain an impossibility as long as Hannibal maintains an interest in him. Time and again, Will has been made to understand that he now lives his life in constant thrall to the merest possibility of Hannibal’s unexpected appearance; he has been made to understand that he now lives his life in the constant hope of spending even a single moment more within the intoxicating swell of Hannibal’s regard. Will is trapped on an island, sitting at the edge of the water and looking out, waiting to see if his Calypso will emerge like a constellation from the greenery. But who is to say what motivates his Calypso? Who is to say what urge strikes Hannibal to aim his car to Will’s campsite in the hours after sunset? After all, Hannibal had said himself that there are many demands upon his time; Will is only one of many distractions in the life of a man who does not need him. And so like Odysseus, what is Will to do in the hours between but wait, and wonder, and stare out over the vast, impassable sea?

The question hovers in Will's mind, pricking at his skin like the bite of countless tiny insects, until he is pulled away from his considerations by the sound of a vehicle approaching. He forces his mind away from the lush foliage of Calypso's island and back into the hot, dusty world of his reality, rolling out of his cot and into the morning sunlight. He sees that Molly's truck is approaching his camp, that it is laden heavy with belongings and that Wally is waving to him from the passenger seat. *They're leaving*, Will thinks. *They've come to say goodbye.*

He runs a hand through his hair as Molly cuts the engine, and he steps closer to the truck while she and Wally spill out of the doors. He hasn't spoken to Molly since she asked him to leave with them, and he finds that he isn't sure how best to greet her.

"Looks like you guys are just about ready to ride," he says, and Wally beams.

"We're going to Florida!" he cries, and, despite himself, Will feels his face spread in a smile. It appears that Wally, at least, is excited for their new life.

"Watch out for the gators," Will teases, and Wally puffs out his skinny chest.

"I ain't afraid of any *gators*," he says, and Molly rolls her eyes.

"Get out of here, Wally," she grouses, but she gives him a fond smile as she tousles his hair. She casts a quick glance at Will and clears her throat. "Now say goodbye and wait for me in the truck," she says. "I have to talk to Will about some grown-up stuff before we go." Will shifts uneasily at her words, but he smiles fondly again when Wally squares his shoulders and extends a skinny hand in his direction.

"Goodbye, Will," he says. "Thanks for helping me and my mom and for teaching me how to get better at baseball."

"You're welcome, Wally," Will says, and he gives him a small smile. He allows himself to wonder, for a moment, what might have been, in some other world: he allows himself to wonder what might have happened if he'd accepted Molly's offer, if he'd turned his back on Redlands once and for all and made a new life with Molly and her son somewhere far away from here. But then he remembers Calypso, and he doesn't linger on the wondering for long. "Do everything your mom says," he tells Wally, "and remember to work on your fastball."

Wally's grand demeanor deflates slightly at the baseball reference, and he grins. "Yeah okay," he says, and then he shakes Will's hand with his skinny wrist. Molly watches them in silence, and Will wonders if she is also thinking about what might have been; he wonders if she is thinking of her own house by the sea.

"Goodbye, Wally," Will says again, and he watches with a keen sense of loss as the boy makes his way back to the truck and clambers up into the passenger seat, pulling the door shut behind him. He looks back to Molly, and he is not surprised to see that her eyes are wet with tears.

"Any chance I can get you to change your mind, Will?" she asks, and Will heaves a sigh.

“Believe me, Molly,” he says, “it’s better for you and Wally if I don’t.”

“I don’t believe you,” Molly says, wiping her eyes, “but I suppose there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Do you have a map?” Will asks, and Molly draws in an unsteady breath.

“Yeah,” she tells him, “Wally already has our route marked out. It’s a long way to Florida. I can’t say I’m looking forward to the journey.”

“The *journey* is less important than what’s at the end of it,” Will says, and Molly gives him a small smile.

“Who knows what’s at the end of a journey anymore?” she asks. “I sure don’t. I used to think I did, but I don’t anymore.”

“I’m glad I met you, Molly,” Will says, stepping closer and placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “You reminded me that there are still good people in the world. You’re a *good person* Molly, don’t forget that, no matter what happens.”

Molly lets out a quiet huff of a laugh, and she moves her eyes to the ground. “I just don’t know how to be anything else,” she says with a shrug. “I can only ever be what comes easiest. But I guess *good* isn’t what you want, is it? It must not be, anyway.”

“What *I* want doesn’t matter,” Will says gently, and Molly keeps her gaze fixed on the dirt at their feet.

“It matters to *someone*,” she whispers. “And maybe someday it’ll matter to you, too.”

Will doesn’t know what to say to this, and so he stays silent, considering her words. Hannibal had *claimed* to care about what he wants, but who’s to say whether there was any truth to that? Calypso had claimed to care about Odysseus, too, but she kept him imprisoned nonetheless.

“I’m sorry, Molly,” he finally settles on, and she clears her throat.

“It’s tough to hold on to anything good, isn’t it Will?” she asks in a quiet voice. “It’s all so slippery.”

Will swallows around the lump in his throat, he swallows around the ringing of the bell sending tremors even now through the deepest parts of his being, and he nods.

“Yeah it is, Molly,” he mutters. “Slick as hell.”

Molly clears her throat. “Goodbye Will,” she says, and Will meets her gaze. Her eyes are wet with unshed tears, and he wonders for the last time if he might have loved her, in some other world.

“Goodbye, Molly,” he tells her. “And good luck.”

Abandonment and Expectation

Chapter Notes

I can't believe we finally made it to this chapter!!! The scene with the Ferris wheel was the very first idea I ever had for this fic, and I moved backwards and forwards to create the story around it. I put off actually writing this for months because I knew doing so would be a huge undertaking, and tbh I'm sort of in disbelief that I've reached this point in the story LOL. Thanks so much to all of you who are reading - you make it all worth it :)!

Also: yes, you WILL find out what Hannibal sees in the fourth world eventually, just not yet. Hang in there ;).

H.

Hannibal has taken to traveling.

Not in the literal sense of the word, of course: it would be an unacceptable breach of expectation for him to simply pull up roots and leave Redlands physically. And yet he has found himself in need of an escape nonetheless, trapped as he is by the architecture of order and expectation, by a life that no longer offers him even a sliver of the satisfaction it once did. The borders of his world are growing smaller and more suffocating around him with every passing day, and he himself feels as though he is expanding. He feels as though he is uncoiling, warping the constraints of the life he's built for himself and reaching desperate fingers out in search of freedom. He can feel his limbs straining against the ties that bind them, he can hear the beast in its cage whispering to him of things he should not do. He knows he is in danger from the man he once allowed himself to be; he knows that action must be taken if he is to prevent disaster. And so, he makes a decision. He releases his mind from the from the world he has created in Redlands: he lets his person suit have full control, ambulating his body through the days like a marionette strung along suspended strings. Meanwhile, he allows his mind to travel. The vastness of his longing spreads out before him like a sea, and he charts a course across years and miles, in search of other worlds.

In one such world, Hannibal finds the life he might have lived if he had never left Florence. He finds a world where he was never nearly caught, where he was never forced to confront the possibility of capture or a lifetime spent rotting in a prison cell. He finds a world where he has spent the last seven years indulging all his darkest whims: killing without restraint, dining on human flesh, and consorting with an endless parade of lovers. He finds this world,

and he decides to stay here a while. He takes comfort in this world, at first. It feels familiar to him: it brings the easement of the known. Food tastes sweeter here, for a time, and colors seem more vibrant. But then time passes, and Hannibal begins to notice strange things about this world. He notices that there is an absence, a sort of distorted emptiness, everywhere he looks. He notices that the flesh is not so sweet, the lovers not so charming as they appeared to be before. He notices that he himself feels flimsy, like little more than a shadow puppet beneath his expensive clothes. This world is a comfort to Hannibal, at first, and then it begins to feel more like a prison.

For the longer Hannibal stays in this world that might have been, the more he is made to understand that the pleasures he once sought as the pinnacle of his existence were hollow. The more time he spends living the life he'd once thought he wanted, the more he is made to understand that all the pleasure in the world, all the sins of the flesh and the luxuries of wealth combined, would do nothing to soothe the dull ache that would one day carve itself into the space beneath his ribs. For in this world, Hannibal will never meet Will, and although the version of himself who lives here will spend his years in blissful ignorance, believing himself to be as happy as he can ever be, the Hannibal of Redlands knows better. The Hannibal of Redlands bears the burden of truth. He knows that the version of himself who lives in this world will spend his coming years in solitude, never finding the thing he doesn't even know he should be seeking. He knows that the version of himself who lives in this world will spend his years careening from pleasure to pleasure, from distraction to distraction, without ever finding true contentment. He knows that the version of himself who lives here will spend his years in solitude, applauding his own cleverness and the faultlessness of his taste, until at last one day he is faced with the gaping maw of his own aloneness, and it will swallow him whole. Hannibal knows this, and he decides that he can't bear to watch it happen. He decides he doesn't want to stay in this world anymore. There are other worlds, of course, where he can spend his time. And so he moves on.

In the second world, Hannibal finds a life where is able to convince Will to flee Redlands with him. He goes to Will's camp in the middle of the night carrying a pair of train tickets and a small suitcase, and he asks a simple question: "Will you come with me?" They don't say goodbye to Alana or the Molly woman; they don't belabour their departure. They simply leave. It's almost polite. They make a life together in this world, Hannibal and Will, without ever revealing the truth of the men they both hide behind their separate masks. Hannibal watches as the version of himself who lives in this world makes love to Will, watches as he cradles Will in the mornings and touches Will's face while he sleeps. Hannibal watches as the version of himself who lives here grapples for closeness through the bars of his cage and spends his years wondering if one morning he will wake up and find Will simply gone. He watches as the version of himself who lives here struggles, day after day, to be satisfied taking only small bites of the things he wants to devour, and he knows he cannot stay here either.

For while the allure of Will's unrelenting nearness has an undeniable pull, Hannibal knows that the version of himself who lives here will never be truly satisfied. He knows that the version of himself who lives here will spend his years trying to hold close that which slips through his fingers like water, like string: Will, or whichever version of himself he cares to show that day. Hannibal knows that the version of himself who lives here will spend his years wondering what might happen if he showed Will the *truth* of himself, if he tore away the

trappings of order and expectation and revealed to Will the darkness that moves beneath his skin. He knows that the version of himself who lives here will spend his years in constant yearning to know the *truth* of Will, be it silver-tongued mask or translucent tenderness, be it killer or cockroach. This world is not enough for Hannibal; it is too close to the world of the real to offer him any true contentment. He is not interested in a piecemeal sort of life with Will; he wants the whole truth, to know and be known. He will not settle for an approximation. And so he moves on, and he finds, at last, a world where he would like to stay.

In this world, Hannibal finds a life where Will tells him the *truth*, and he tells Will the truth in kind. He watches as the version of himself who lives here arrives at Will's camp in the middle of the night and asks a simple question: "Who are you, Will?" And he watches Will's face grow still, he watches as Will parts his pink lips and answers without artifice: "I am what *you* are, Hannibal: an unrepentant killer, a man who sees beauty in brutality. I am the other half of your soul. I know you, I *see* you, and I know that you can see me too." Hannibal watches as the version of himself who lives here draws Will close against his chest; he watches as the edges of their two bodies blur together in the darkness until he can no longer distinguish one from the other. He watches himself make love to Will knowing that he is making love to the *truth* of him. He watches as he allows his person suit to disintegrate, watches as the slippery threads of Will's mask loosen and unfurl into nothingness. He watches as the version of himself who lives here takes Will's face between his fingers, looks deeps into his eyes and finds, at last, only honesty there: no stone walls, no impenetrable seas, only light, gleaming through sculpted glass. And Hannibal knows without question that *this* is the only world where he wants to stay; *this* is the only world he seeks.

But there is a fourth world, one whose borders are constantly moving, inescapable and encroaching on the sanctity of Hannibal's chosen world like a poison. Hannibal knows what he will find if he crosses the border into this fourth world; he knows the things that he will be forced to see and do. And so he skirts around it. He tries to focus on the chosen world that he has found: the world of his happiness, the world of his unrelenting bliss. He tries to focus on the vision of a house by the sea, of a wide kitchen lit by afternoon sunlight. He tries to focus on the feeling of a warm breeze touching his skin as he cooks dinner, knowing that Will is waiting only one room over. He tries to focus on the smell of Will's hair as he slides a plate onto the dining room table; he tries to focus on the sound of Will's laughter after dinner, on the calloused comfort of his hand as they move together up the stairs.

But the fourth world is insidious: its stench creeps through their lace curtains and it claws its way into their bedroom. Its oily darkness coats their skin, and it sullies the pristine whiteness of their sheets. Its greasy haze sets Will to coughing, his beautiful body wracked with spasms until at last he chokes up blood, and he turns wide eyes to Hannibal as if to say, "What happened?"

But Hannibal has no answer for him, neither the Hannibal who lives in this world nor the Hannibal of Redlands. For what can either of them say? The fourth world has moved into this chosen world like a plague, unstoppable, and it will not stop until it has taken everything that is precious and sacred to Hannibal; until it has taken everything that Hannibal holds dear and left him alone again, right back where he started. The fourth world forces Hannibal to flee his

mind at last, clutching his hair in the darkness and trying to calm the unsteady gallop of his heart.

He cannot erase the visions of the things he's seen; he cannot silence the questions he has been forced to ask. He cannot swallow the acrid taste left lingering in his mouth, or hear anything beyond the ringing in the space behind his right ear. He sits in the darkness as his wife sleeps beside him, and he makes a decision. He rises from their bed and dresses himself in silence, passing through his own house like a stranger, like a wraith. He gets in his car and he drives to Will's campsite conscious only of the dull ache beneath his ribcage and the fog covering his vision. He has no idea what he'll find when he arrives; he has no idea if he'll be strong enough to resist the urgings of the beast in its cage should he find Will in bed with the Molly woman. But the strings of fate are woven in his favor, it seems, for he arrives to find Will alone and staring into the fire, gleaming like some translucent, iridescent thing. Will rises to stand when Hannibal opens the car door, and his pretty lips fall open as Hannibal steps out.

"Hannibal?" he asks, and Hannibal feels himself go preternaturally still. There are things he had meant to say to Will, in this moment, but he finds that the words won't come. He finds that Will is so beautiful and so profane that he cannot resist the urge to fall upon him. They don't even make it to the cabin before he begins to tear at Will's clothes, sending fingers in search of hidden skin and pressing his teeth into the white flesh of Will's throat. The taste of blood and skin unfurl against his tongue, and he draws in a ragged breath.

This, the voice of his longing whispers from the courtyard in his mind, *this is what I want.*

He presses Will down into the dirt beside the fire, making no attempt at tenderness. Will's pale body is molten against the flames, and through the red haze and the shadows it seems to Hannibal that he has turned to liquid. It seems to Hannibal that Will is spreading out beneath him like an oil spill, and he is overwhelmed by the desire to contain it. Will has his eyes closed, his back arched and his limbs trembling as Hannibal moves searching fingers over his cock.

"Did you miss me, Doc?" Will whispers, and Hannibal speaks without meaning to.

"Who are you, Will?" he asks.

(It is a desperate attempt to make an imagined world real and he knows it, but he can't take back the words.)

Will's flushed face moves in a spasm. "Who are *you*, Doctor Lecter?" he gasps in response, and Hannibal savors the taste of his own bitterness. Will's words ring in his ear like a bell, like a constantly-tolling reminder: *This is not the world you want it to be, no matter what you do*.

"Answering a question with another question is a bad habit of yours, Will," Hannibal says, and he presses the fingers of his free hand against Will's throat, flushed red now and swollen with bite marks.

“I’ve got a lot of bad habits, Doc,” Will groans against the press of his fingers, “and in case you haven’t noticed, most of them work in your favor.”

“Answer the question, Will,” Hannibal says. He is losing patience. Will draws in a sharp breath before opening his eyes, fixing them on some distant constellation. Hannibal watches and wonders what he might be looking at, covetous even of Will’s thoughts.

“Who do you *want* me to be, Hannibal?” he asks at length, and Hannibal moves his free hand to the fading bruises on Will’s torso.

“I want you to tell me the *truth*, Will,” he says, and Will lets out a choked sound.

“The truth?” he breathes. “The *truth*? Okay then, Doctor Lecter. The truth is: I’m exactly what you told those nurses. I’m just a migrant. I’m nobody. I’m just here until I’m not anymore.”

This is not the world you want it to be, Hannibal reminds himself, *no matter what you do.* Abruptly, he pulls himself away. He pulls his fingers free from Will’s trousers and he rises to stand, ignoring the pulsing of desire in his stomach, ignoring the roiling yearning in his limbs and the whispering of his longing from the smoke-filled courtyard in his mind. Will sits up, pulling his knees to his chest and blinking at Hannibal through the haze of firelight.

“It’s the *truth*, Hannibal,” he says. “What do you want me to say? Is there some other version of the truth you’d prefer?”

Will’s hair is tousled, his lips are swollen and the white skin of his neck is mottled with teeth-marks and blood. He looks like a nymph, he looks like a siren, he looks like everything that Hannibal has learned to savor, everything that Hannibal wants so badly to possess. In these moments, Will looks like everything that would have driven the Hannibal of Florence to fling himself willingly over the edge of a precipice. But he is not the Hannibal of Florence. Not in this world. Not anymore.

“Have you always been a liar, Will?” Hannibal asks, and he watches Will’s face change. He watches a darkness unfurl over Will’s features, and he thinks to himself that it is not the darkness of a killer, just that of a cockroach with a very hard shell. “Were you *born* a liar,” he continues, “or was the skill something you developed over many years of practice?”

Will’s eyes are gleaming in the firelight, and Hannibal can see his pulse fluttering beneath the skin of his throat, beneath teeth marks left only moments before.

“Have *you* always been a liar, *Doctor Lecter*?” Will asks. “Last time I checked, *I’m* not the one with the ring on his finger.”

This is not the world you want it to be, Hannibal reminds himself, *no matter what you do.*

“Goodbye, Will,” he says, and he begins to turn away.

“Hannibal,” Will calls, his voice sharper now, more shrill. Hannibal goes still, but he doesn’t turn around. “Why are you doing this? Why are you leaving? Why are you - what’s changed?

I've been as honest with you as I can be, I always have been, from the beginning."

Hannibal thinks of the fourth world, he thinks of Will's pink lips stained red with blood, of his beautiful body wracked with spasms over the sullied sheets of their bed, and he feels his stomach churn. *Liar*, he thinks. *Beautiful, fickle, silver-tongued* liar.

"Hannibal," Will says again, his voice softer now, quavering, as sweet a siren song as Hannibal has ever heard. "Hannibal, don't leave. Stay with me. *Please.* " But Hannibal has already stuffed his ears with wax.

"Goodbye, Will," he says again, and he guides his vessel away from the rocks.

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W.

Will is not accustomed to feelings of abandonment. He's not accustomed to feelings of abandonment because *abandonment* requires *expectation*, and Will learned long ago that it's a bad idea to ever expect anything of anyone. And yet, when Hannibal turned his back and left him naked and shivering in his own camp, when Hannibal ignored his pleas and left him discarded like a piece of garbage by the side of the road, that is what Will felt. He felt *abandoned*.

How is this possible? He asked himself. *How is it possible to feel betrayed by someone who doesn't even know you? Who you don't even really know yourself?*

Because the truth of the matter is that Will *doesn't* know Hannibal. That much has been made abundantly clear. Hannibal is as inconstant as the tides: one moment whispering vows in the darkness, the next moment hurling insults through the firelight. One moment he is making entreatments of trust and of protection, and the next moment he is turning his back and leaving Will choking on his own unshed tears.

Will finds himself wondering, in the hours after he is cast aside, about the *truth* of Hannibal. He wonders about the person Hannibal *really* is, the person he is with his wife, the person he is with his friends. In the early days of their acquaintance, Will created a persona he intended to use to lure Hannibal closer to him. It had worked, but never once had he considered that Hannibal might have done the same for him. He'd never once considered that the man he'd grown to love (Yes, to *love*, because that's what this is, isn't it? That the whole root of the problem, isn't it?) was in fact nothing more than an elaborately constructed set of lies. Their conversations in the rose garden, Hannibal's outburst at the police station, the force of his lovemaking and even his whispered vows: had they all been nothing more than a facade, created for the purpose of his own entertainment? Was all of this done just to see how far Hannibal could take it? Wind Will up, and watch him go?

The questions feel like gnarled rose branches coiling themselves around Will's heart, constricting his chest and making it hard for him to breathe. *I'm such an idiot,* he tells himself, *I'm such an idiot*, and in the darkness of his little cabin he tastes the salt of tears he can no longer bear to hold back. *You fell in love with a lie,* he tells himself. *You lost at your own game. You fell in love with someone who will never love you back.*

And the worst of it is, Will still doesn't think he can leave. He thinks of Odysseus, imprisoned not by chains or shackles, but by a force far more insidious. Calypso has him bound, *Hannibal* has him bound, and what hope does he have of breaking the ties that bind him? Very little hope at all, he thinks. Very little hope at all.

He falls asleep at last some time just before dawn, his mouth salty with the taste of his own tears, and he wakes up to the sound of knocking on his cabin door.

"Will?" A voice calls. "Are you in there?"

Will sits up with a lurch, casting his gaze through the open shutters and noting that the sun is high in the sky. *Shit*, he thinks, *how long was I asleep?* He forces himself to his feet and staggers to the door, pushing it open with a trembling hand.

"Hello?" he manages to say, and when he looks down he's met with the sight of Margot, staring up at him through the sunlight. They blink at each other in mutually stunned silence for several moments, and Will wishes keenly that he had thought to put on a shirt before he opened the door.

"Hey, Will," Margot says slowly. "Is this... a bad time?"

All at once, Will remembers: *the carnival*. He'd promised Margot he'd meet her at the orphanage by eight. God only knows what time it is now. *Shit,* he thinks, *shit*.

"Margot, I'm so sorry," he says, pressing his palm against his forehead. "I didn't sleep well last night, I overslept - give me five minutes and I'll be ready to go, I promise. Where's Abigail? Is she still at the hospital?"

Margot runs her eyes over Will's face and keeps going, her gaze lingering on the skin of his throat. Will moves self-conscious fingers to his neck and feels the tenderness of swollen, bitten skin. *Shit.*

"Abigail's in the car, Will," Margot says. "I'll let her know you can still go. We can all ride over together. Just… pull yourself together first, okay?"

Will swallows around the lump in his throat. *Shit.*

"Yeah, yeah I will. Thanks Margot," he says, but when he moves away she lifts a hand and presses it against the closing door.

"Oh, and Will?" she says. "You may want to consider wearing a shirt with a high collar."

Will feels himself flush all over, and he can only nod before he closes the door. He dresses quickly, careful to cover his neck, and he guzzles a glass of water before stumbling out into

the daylight. Margot is milling around his campsite, studying all of his worldly possessions with no attempt to hide her curiosity, and she raises a painted eyebrow when he steps closer.

“Ready to go?” she asks, and he nods.

“Yeah,” he tells her, “let’s go.”

Thankfully, Abigail is very forgiving of Will’s tardiness, her excitement for the carnival overwhelming any disappointment she may have felt about the hours lost as a result of Will’s negligence. Will, however, feels the effects of his own failure keenly. *What’s wrong with you?* He asks himself. *The least you can do is keep a promise to a little girl.*

Abigail prattles happily through the length of the car ride, seated between Will and Margot and craning her neck to look out the window. Will’s never been in a chauffeured car before, but in his current state of mind he finds himself unable to appreciate the luxury.

“Have you ever been to a carnival, Mister Will?” Abigail asks him.

“Yeah, Abigail, a long time ago,” he tells her. He can’t seem to avoid the urge to press fingers against the bruised, bitten skin of his neck.

“Did you have fun?” she asks, and Will draws in a breath. The last time he went to a carnival he cut the skin off a man he saw beating a dog with a bullwhip, and he woke up three days later in a motel room across state lines.

“Yeah, Abigail,” he says, “I had a really good time.”

When they arrive at the carnival, Will finds himself utterly unprepared to be there. He’s unprepared for the press of bodies, for the bombardment of color, for the overwhelming array of smells and noises relentlessly assaulting his senses. “WONDERS BEYOND IMAGINATION,” a sign promises, and Will has to shield his eyes from its garish assault. He’s still reeling from Hannibal’s incomprehensible visit, from Hannibal’s curt dismissal and the uncertainty of whether or not Hannibal will ever come back. He’s exhausted, and he doesn’t want to be here. In fact, there are few places in the world that Will would rather be *less* than where he is in this moment, but he’d made a promise to Abigail, and he thinks that he has done enough horrible shit in his life without breaking a promise to a little girl. And so he stays, moving amidst the unrelenting crowds, lightheaded from the heat and twitchy from the invisible touch of countless roving eyes. He tells himself to ignore his discomfort. He tells himself to forget about Hannibal, at least for today. He tells himself to focus on Abigail, on making sure that her excitement about the carnival will not have been in vain.

“Are you having fun, Mister Will?” Abigail asks from her place beside him, and he gives her a wide smile.

“Yeah Abigail,” he tells her, “I’m having a great time.”

(This is a lie, of course, but what’s so bad about a lie if it means that someone else can be happy?)

Abigail is silent for several moments as they walk, but she speaks up again at length. “Thank you for the fairy floss, Mister Will,” she says, and Will looks down at her. Her small face is covered with smears of colored sugar, so he stops walking and crouches down in front of her.

“Are you sure you actually *ate* any of that fairy floss, Abigail?” he teases. “Cause it looks like you just smeared it all over your cheeks.”

She gives him a wide smile at this, her eyes liquid-bright, and nods. *She looks happy*, Will thinks. *Happy.* He is overwhelmed by a wave of fondness for her, and he uses the sleeve of his shirt to gently wipe her face clean. When he’s done, she breaks off a piece of the airy candy with her splinted wrist and offers it to him.

“Do you want some?” she asks, and Will shakes his head.

She’s come so far, he thinks. *There was a time when her hands never stopped shaking, when she could hardly talk. And look at her now.*

“No thanks, Abigail,” he says, “the fairy floss is all yours.” She shrugs, and the piece of spun sugar disappears into her mouth.

“You should eat *something* though, Mister Will,” she says. “You’re the one who always tell me how important it is to eat. I haven’t seen you eat anything all day.”

“It’s okay Abigail,” he tells her. “I’m just not very hungry.” She studies him, her gaze assessing, but she lets the subject go.

“Okay Mister Will,” she says, and they continue on their journey through the carnival.

Hours pass, and although Will does not find any “wonders beyond imagination,” he finds there are at least enough distractions here to keep his mind away from Hannibal. He tries and fails to win a game where colored rings are thrown around the necks of glass bottles, and Abigail’s peals of laughter at his lack of skill ring out through the crowd, high and joyous and clear. They see a man whose skin is covered head-to-toe with tattoos of scales and wings and horns, and they see another man whose face is masked by the skull of some large animal. They stop to pet a draft horse who stands in placid silence outside a colored tent, and they share a conversation with a gentle man who doesn’t look at them. They watch a beautiful blind woman with wide, dark eyes coax a snake out of a basket, and although Will knows it is a trick, he finds that he still fears for her.

“Did you *see* that, Mister Will?” Abigail cries, and Will places a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah,” he says, tearing his eyes away. “I see it. Let’s keep going.”

Through all the hours spent at the carnival, Abigail looks for all the world like a ray of sunlight through clouds. She looks for all the world like she is just a normal little girl: a girl who is having one good day among the endless array of good days that is her life. She looks like infinitely more than a particularly unique variety of tragedy, and Will wishes he knew how to make it last.

“There it is, Mister Will!” she suddenly says, and she reaches for his hand. “It’s the Ferris wheel! Look! Look! See how high it goes?” she cries, nearly tripping over her own feet as she tugs him through the crowd. “See how fast it goes? Can we get in line? Can we?”

“Of course we can, Abigail,” Will tells her, and he allows himself to be led through the line and right up to the base of the spindly contraption.

“Are you scared, Mister Will?” she asks him once they’re seated, once the metal bar has locked into place across their hips and they have no choice but to ascend, and Will shakes his head.

“No, Abigail,” he says, “I’m not scared.”

“I’m not scared either, Mister Will,” she tells him. “I’m never scared when I’m with you.”

Will feels his heart give a brittle pang, and he hears the echo of Hannibal’s voice in his mind: *That is what you do, Will*, he’d said, all those months ago. *You shatter things and leave it to others to pick up the pieces.* The machine rumbles to life beneath them.

“We’re moving, Mister Will!” Abigail cries. “We’re moving!” Her small hands are gripped tight around the metal bar, and she leans forward as the cart is lifted into the air, looking around with wide eyes. Soon, they are high enough above the crowd that they can look out over the carnival like a sea; they are high enough that the oppressive odor of animals and popcorn and unwashed bodies is gone, replaced by a warm breeze. Abigail draws in a breath beside him, pressing her small hands against her face.

“Isn’t this beautiful, Mister Will?” she whispers, and Will nods.

“Yes Abigail,” he says. “It is.”

The Ferris wheel grinds to a halt when they are just past its peak, and Abigail squirms with excitement beside him, swinging the cart with her weight. “They let it stay still for a while so we can look around,” she tells him. “I read about it in the newspaper.”

“You read about it yourself, Abigail?” Will asks. “You read the paper all by yourself?”

“Yes,” she replies. “Doctor Lecter gave me a copy and I read the whole thing.”

“Good job, Abigail,” Will says, and he ignores the frisson of pain down his spine at the mention of Hannibal. “I’m really proud of you.”

She gives him a small, shy smile. “Thanks, Mister Will,” she says. “I’ve been practicing just like you told me to. I’m getting better.” She swings her skinny legs. “This is so much fun,” she says. “Thank you again for bringing me here.”

Will reaches out and tousles her hair the way Molly used to do to Walter. “You don’t have to thank me, Abigail,” he tells her, and she smiles.

“You know what, Mister Will?” she asks. “I bet we could play cat’s cradle, even all the way up here.”

Will huffs out a surprised laugh at her words. “You brought your yarn today, Abigail?” he asks, and he watches as she reaches into her pocket and withdraws a long, red string.

“Of course, Mister Will,” she tells him. “I take it everywhere I go.”

Will laughs again as she weaves her fingers in and out like spider legs, forming a red web. He guides his fingers through it obediently, and then he begins to look around. He knows it’ll be some time before Abigail pulls the string taut, trying and failing to catch him off his guard, so he enjoys the silence and the soft breeze on his face. He looks out over the carnival spread like a menagerie below them, and he sees something that makes the sinking bell hit rock bottom in his mind.

It’s Hannibal and Alana Lecter, weaving their way through the crowd with all the grace of a pair of dancers. They are unspeakably beautiful, impeccably adorned and gleaming side-by-side. They stand out amongst the crowd of weary laborers and threadbare housewives like peacocks in a field of sparrows, and Will finds that he can’t look away from them. Alana Lecter’s hair bounces in soft waves with every step, and the late afternoon sun makes Hannibal’s skin glow like burnished gold. Everything about them seems *easy*: the familiarity of their movements, the synchronization of their stride, the intimacy of their gazes meeting. Looking at them makes Will feel like his skin is being doused with boiling oil, and yet he still can’t bring himself to look away.

“Mister Will,” Abigail says from beside him, but Will can’t seem to hear her. He can’t seem to do anything at all but watch in rapt fascination as Hannibal stops to play the ring-bottle game, landing every attempt with ease while his wife claps her hands close beside him.

“Mister Will,” Abigail says again, but Will can’t seem to hear her. He can’t seem to do anything at all but watch in mesmerized horror as Hannibal takes a heart-shaped toy for his victory and passes it to his wife with a smile.

“Mister Will,” Abigail says, her voice louder now, but Will still can’t seem to hear her. He can’t seem to do anything at all but watch in mute desolation as Alana Lecter stands up on her tiptoes, as Hannibal laces his arms around his wife’s slim waist and presses their lips together in a kiss. A public kiss. A sunlit kiss. A kiss with no secrets, a kiss with no masks, in full view of the admiring crowd.

I can’t do this, Will thinks, and the words seem to echo in the darkest chasms of his mind. *I can’t do this anymore.*

He feels the sudden press of yarn against his skin, and he tears his gaze away from the vision of Hannibal and Alana Lecter to find that Abigail has tightened her cat’s cradle. Will stares down at his wrist, bound now with crimson yarn, and he tries to make sense of what he’s seeing. The Ferris wheel rumbles back to life beneath them.

“You’re trapped, Mister Will,” Abigail tells him, and Will swallows.

“You’re right,” he says. His voice sounds like it’s coming from very far away. “I got distracted. You caught me. Good job, Abigail.”

“You told me you’d never get trapped,” she says. “That’s what you told me the very first day I met you.” Will shakes his head, trying to dispel the echoing of words in the darkest chasms of his mind.

“I know,” he says, “I-”

“You said you’d never get trapped!” she cries, and Will bites his lip.

“I’m sorry, Abigail,” he tells her. “I’m sorry. I got distracted. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

Abigail draws in a breath, and she pulls the yarn away from his wrist. “My dad always said the best traps were the ones people didn’t even notice until they were in them,” she says, and Will turns his gaze back to Hannibal and Alana Lecter, moving as one through the crowd, their arms interlaced and their heads tilted close together. They’re laughing.

I can’t do this, he thinks again, with sudden and inescapable finality. *I can’t do this anymore.*

“Your dad was right,” he says, and Abigail sighs.

“I know,” she says. “My dad was right about a lot of things. I wish he wasn’t, but he was.”

“I’m sorry I got distracted, Abigail,” Will says again. He doesn’t know what else to say. She slides the fingers of her uninjured hand into his as their cart approaches the ground.

“It’s not your fault, Mister Will,” she says, and she continues to hold his hand even as they both rise to stand. Will is scarcely aware of his own movements, his mind still fixated on the shape of Hannibal’s shoulders as he moved closer to his wife, on the way Hannibal’s broad fingers had looked gripped around her slim waist. They walk in shared silence for several minutes, until at last Abigail tugs his arm. “Mister Will,” she says, and he moves his gaze to hers as through a fog. “You shouldn’t trust him. He’s not the person he pretends to be.”

Will feels his face fold into a frown, unable to make sense of her words. He thinks perhaps that he’s misheard her, and he shakes his head. “What do you mean, Abigail?” he asks, but before she can respond, they are interrupted by the sound of a voice.

“Abigail!” the voice cries. “Will! Fancy seeing you here!”

They turn as one in search of who has spoken, and Will sees that it is Margot, holding a stuffed bear in her arms and calling out to them as she weaves her way through the crowd. “Have you eaten?” she shouts, and Will looks down at Abigail again.

“*Who* shouldn’t I trust, Abigail?” he asks, but she shakes her head and looks away.

“Nobody, Mister, Will,” she says in a quiet voice. “Forget I said anything.”

“*Who*, Abigail?” Will says again, but by this time Margot has reached them, and she is sliding her arms into theirs in a companionable movement.

"*Wonders beyond imagination*," she proclaims in a loud voice, and she laughs as she tugs them both closer. "Have you guys had fun today?" she asks, and Abigail nods.

"Yes, Miss Verger," she tells her. "We've had a very good day."

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H.

Hannibal removes Abigail's splint on a Tuesday, and they spend the morning in the rose garden awaiting Margot's arrival to take her back to the Verger Family Orphanage. Hannibal knows that once Abigail is gone, any hope he has maintained of benefiting surreptitiously from another one of Will Graham's visits will be extinguished forever. If he is to see Will Graham again, he knows, he will have to seek him out. He does not intend to do so.

"Remember what I told you about light and shadow, Abigail," Hannibal says. "Shadows are what give shape to our world. Capture them, and you have captured life." Abigail's pencil stops moving, and she studies the paper in her lap with an assessing gaze. She moves her fingers and begins to sketch a shadow at the base of her Ferris wheel. "Well done, Abigail," he tells her. "You are improving every day."

"Thank you Doctor Lecter," she chimes, and Hannibal hums, turning his gaze to the rose bushes. They've stopped blooming, now, past the season of their peak, and the air is thick with the cloying scent of their decay.

"Do you trust Will, Abigail?" Hannibal asks, and she grows still across the small table.

"Yes, I trust him," she says, as though it were the easiest thing in the world for her to say and do.

"What do you think is going to happen when Will decides it's time to leave Redlands, Abigail?" he asks. "He won't stay here forever, he can't. Do you think he's going to take you with him when that time comes? Do you imagine him making a place for you in his world?"

Abigail twists her small fingers around her pencil, and she presses her lips together. "Yes," she says in a quiet voice, and Hannibal frowns.

"It's dangerous to place our hopes in other people, Abigail," he warns her. "Especially people like Will."

Abigail keeps her eyes fixed on her drawing. "We have to trust somebody," she says. "My dad always said humans aren't solitary hunters. We need our family."

Hannibal turns his gaze back to the rose bushes, and he imagines the shape of Will's shoulders moving between them. He thinks about Alana: he thinks about the woman who is his wife, but who is not his family. He doesn't have a family, not really; he hasn't had one since the passing of a cold winter night many long decades ago. Since then, it has never occurred to him to *want* one: the loss of one family was quite enough to dissuade him from feeling any interest in creating another. And yet, he finds himself fixated on Abigail's words.

"A family?" he repeats. "And is that what you think Will could be to you? Your family?"

Abigail lets out a tight breath. "I hope so," she whispers. "Someday." Hannibal looks at her across the table, studying her small face. Her eyes are wet with unshed tears, and her hands are shaking. He finds he nearly pities her.

"Why Will?" he asks. "Is it because he reminds you of your father?"

Abigail shakes her head, her dark hair swinging against her shoulders. "No," she says. "Mister Will's not like my dad, not at all."

"And yet you imagine him as your adoptive father anyway," Hannibal observes. "Why?"

"Because Mister Will's not like other people," she whispers, "and he doesn't mind that I'm not either."

Hannibal hums. "I'm not like other people either, Abigail," he says, and she meets his gaze.

"I know you're not," she tells him.

"And do you trust *me*?" he asks, but she shakes her head.

"No Doctor Lecter," she says, "I don't trust you at all."

Hannibal sits up straighter in his seat, finds himself offended. "Why not, Abigail?" he asks. She remains silent for several moments, her face very still.

"Because of the doves," she says at last, and Hannibal feels his face curve into a frown.

"Would you be so kind as to elaborate on that, Abigail?" he asks, but she looks away.

"No," she tells him, "I won't."

"It's rude not to answer questions that people have asked you, Abigail," he scolds, but she is no longer looking at him. She is looking past him to the doorway, her small shoulders growing tight and her pale face going blank.

"Mason Verger is here," she says in a whisper, and Hannibal turns to see him stepping out of the doorway and into the rose garden with a gruesome approximation of a smile plastered across his porcine features. Margot follows a step behind him, her movements stiff and her expression unreadable. Hannibal resists the urge to sigh. He fears he does not have the patience to deal with Mason Verger today.

“Well, well, *well*,” Mason crows, “if it isn’t *Doctor Lecter* and my *favorite* little orphan girl! How *are* you today, Amelia?” he asks, stepping closer to Abigail, and she fixes her gaze on the Ferris wheel she’s drawn.

“I’m good, Mister Verger,” she says in a blank voice. “How are you?”

Mason barks out an ear-curdling laugh. “Oh, *me*, Alison?” he asks. “I’m *peachy*. Just *peachy*.”

Margot moves past her brother and comes to stand beside Abigail’s chair, steeling her shoulders like some whip-thin guard dog. Hannibal turns his eyes to Mason.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit, Mason?” he asks, and Mason grins at him.

“*Well*, Doctor Lecter,” he says, “I *hoped* that you and I could speak *privately* for a moment. Over a matter of… *shared interest*.”

Hannibal turns his gaze to Margot, but her face is utterly blank. She will offer no assistance in this matter. He rises to stand. “Very well, Mason,” he says, “we can speak in my office.” He leads Mason back into the hospital, and when he casts a glance back over his shoulder he sees that Margot’s shoulders have loosened, and that Abigail’s face has lost its sickly pallor. Mason bobs along the hallway behind him, sticking his face into the passing patient rooms like some cartoonish ghoul.

“Looks like you run a pretty *tight ship* here, Doctor Lecter,” he proclaims. “It’s *good* to know you’re putting all that *money* I give you to good use.”

“Of course, Mason,” Hannibal says evenly, and when they reach his office he unlocks the door and presses it open. He studies the room’s quiet sanctity for a moment before he steps inside, gazing at the specter of Will Graham where he smirks from his place by the window. At last, he crosses the threshold trailed by his porcine shadow, and the specter of Will disappears. There is a heart-shaped toy on his desk, a prize he’d stored here after the carnival two days earlier, and Mason settles his gaze on it with a leer.

“*One of these things is not like the others!”* he sings. “You doing some *redecorating*, Doctor Lecter? I *love* the direction you’re going.” Hannibal gives him a blank smile.

“That was a gift I won for my wife at the carnival,” he says.

“Aww, how *sweet*,” Mason croons, and then he flings himself down into one of Hannibal’s chairs. “What a *good husband* you are. How *lucky* Alana is to have snared *you*.”

Hannibal keeps his face still. “It’s always a pleasure to see you, Mason,” he says, “but I must admit I’m surprised that you’ve called upon me here. Have you come to check on the administration of the hospital? I can assure you all our records are in order.”

“Oh, I’m *sure* your *records* are in order, Doctor Lecter,” Mason says. “I’m *sure* you’re doing an *exemplary* job running this hospital, just like you do *everything else*. But that’s *not* why I’m here.”

Hannibal moves his head, allows himself a small release of the tension that is building in his shoulders. “Then why *are* you here, Mason?” he asks, and Mason leers at him.

“*I’m* visiting *you* because *Jack Crawford* visited *me*, Doctor Lecter,” he replies. “*Sheriff Crawford* came all the way to my *house*. He *interrupted* me while I was *feeding* my *pigs*, and I don’t *like* to be interrupted, Doctor Lecter. I don’t think it’s very much *fun*.”

“Jack Crawford visited you?” Hannibal asks, feigning surprise. “Really? How extraordinary.”

Mason’s face twists, and he raises his pale eyebrows. “*Is* it extraordinary, Doctor Lecter?” he asks. “*Is* it?” Hannibal keeps his face still, blinking at Mason through the eyeholes of his person suit. Mason leans back in his chair. “Do ya wanna *know* what Sheriff Crawford *said*, Doctor Lecter?” he asks. “Do ya wanna *know* what Uncle Jack *told* me?”

Hannibal crosses his legs, resting his hands on his knees and raising his eyebrows. “If you wish to tell me, Mason,” he says, “then I am more than willing to listen.”

“*Jack Crawford* told *me* to stay *away* from Will Graham,” Mason hisses. “*He* told *me* there’s no *evidence* against Will Graham. That Will Graham is *innocent*. *He* said that if *I* try to *sic* my proverbial *dogs* on Will Graham, he’ll make sure I’m *punished*.”

Hannibal studies Mason, his ruddy face grown flushed, the slight sheen of sweat forming above his brow, and his stomach churns with disgust. *That’s not a man*, a voice in his mind whispers. *That’s a pig.*

“Jack Crawford has always been a man committed to upholding the law,” Hannibal forces himself to say, and Mason scoffs.

“Oh *certainly*,” he crows, “*certainly*. But *I* don’t think it was *Jack Crawford* who wanted that particular message *delivered* to me, *Doctor Lecter*. *I* think it was *you*.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “*Me*, Mason?” he says. “What stake could I possibly have in your dealings with Will Graham?”

Across the desk, Mason’s face twists into a leer, his plump lips coiling. “Well isn’t *that* a *million-dollar question*, Doctor Lecter,” he cries. “*I* was just going to ask *you* the same thing.”

“It’s a simple question to answer, Mason,” Hannibal says mildly. “I have no opinion on the subject of Will Graham beyond the time he spent as my patient in this hospital.”

Mason raises his eyebrows. “Is that *so*, Doctor Lecter?” he asks. “You have *no* opinion? No *interest* whatsoever?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “No Mason, none beyond that of a doctor toward his patient.”

Abruptly, Mason bursts into a fit of laughter, gripping his hands around the arms of his chair and heaving. “Well that is *great news*, Doctor Lecter,” he crows, “cause there for a while, I could have *sworn* that you and I were having a bit of a *competition* over Will Graham, and I’d *hate* to have *you* as an adversary.” Hannibal shifts in his chair.

“A competition?” he asks. “What an idea. To what end?” Mason’s face twists into a grin.

“A *competition* over *Will Graham*, Doctor Lecter,” he says again, and Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean, Mason,” he says. “I’m fairly certain now that you’ve spent far more time pondering the subject of Will Graham than I have.” Mason laughs again.

“Oh, *undoubtedly* I *have*, Doctor Lecter,” he says. “*Undoubtedly*. What can I say? Will Graham is… a *tantalizing* subject to me.”

Hannibal grows preternaturally still, and he blinks against the sound of ringing in the space behind his right ear.

“I’m *glad* Sheriff Crawford came to visit me, Doctor Lecter,” Mason continues. “Now that I know all of this wasn’t just some *competition* between us, I can’t stop *thinking* about what might have *happened* if I’d been able to get my *hands* on Will Graham.”

Hannibal’s fingers twitch against the fabric of his trousers, and the beast in his mind lets out a shivering hiss between the bars of its cage.

“I can’t stop *thinking* about the things I would have *done* to Will Graham if I *could* have,” Mason says, and Hannibal remains still as a tar-black sludge begins to move beneath his skin. “Lucky for *us*, though, Doctor Lecter, Sheriff Crawford saved the day. If he hadn't, an *innocent* man might have been *punished* for *crimes* he didn’t *commit*.” Hannibal licks his lips.

“There are reasons we have laws in place to protect the rights of the accused, Mason,” he forces himself to say, and the words are steady and calm through the mouthpiece of his person suit even as his vision is overwhelmed with red.

“Oh, of *course* Doctor Lecter,” Mason says, “of *course*. And haven’t I learned my lesson about *that*? In fact, I think the *only* thing *worse* than an *innocent* man getting punished for *crimes* he didn’t *commit* would be a *guilty* man walking *free*. Wouldn’t you *agree*, Doctor Lecter?”

But Hannibal hardly hears the question. He is entranced by a vision of himself, severing Mason’s tongue at the root and shoving it back down his throat until he chokes on it. *You could silence that loathsome voice forever*, a voice in his mind whispers. *You haven’t lost your taste for it, have you?*

“I agree, Mason,” he says at length. “There is no greater threat than a killer who walks free.”

Mason sits up straighter in his seat. “A *killer*, Doctor Lecter?” he asks, tilting his head with a grin. “Who said anything about a *killer*?”

Hannibal stays still, feels the touch of a scorching breeze moving over deserts in his mind. “No-one said anything about a killer, Mason,” he says. “My mistake.”

Mason's face twitches, and he leans forward in his chair. "Cause we don't *know* any of *those*, do we, Doctor Lecter?" he asks. "Will Graham is *innocent.* We don't *know* any *killers* who walk *free*."

"No we don't, Mason," Hannibal says.

"And lucky for *us*, eh Doctor Lecter?" Mason hisses. "Cause what a *pickle* it would be if we *did*."

"What a pickle indeed, Mason," Hannibal repeats, wondering what it might be like to feed Mason's corpse to his own pigs, "what a pickle indeed."

A Noble Retreat

Chapter Summary

*** PLEASE NOTE that there are discussions of implied suicide in this chapter similar to what we hear from Bella in the TV show. If that will be distressing for you, please skip to the second part of the chapter signified by three + marks and an "H".***

Hi everyone!! Sorry for yet another long wait between chapters - life came at me fast! I hope you didn't think I'd abandoned the story. Like I said before, I promise that's not going to happen :)! I loved reading your comments on the last chapter, especially what you had to say about Mason. We'll be seeing more of him soon, so stay tuned! In the meantime, I give you a very dramatic, angst-filled chapter that is also a major turning point in the story. Happy reading! <3 <3

W.

Will has lost track of the days. It began when Margot dropped him off at his camp after the carnival, leaving him with a short farewell and an unreadable look in her eyes.

“See you around, Will?” she’d asked, but Will found that he could hardly hear her.

“Yeah,” he told her, in a voice that was not his own. “Yeah. See you around, Margot.”

He watched her tail-lights disappear into the darkness, and, at last, his mind grew blissfully, blessedly still. All the voices and the smells and the pressing heat of the day distilled themselves into nothingness in his mind, and he sat in the silence of his empty camp and turned his eyes skyward. The cosmos was an immense, inky black above him, punctuated by tiny pin-pricks of light, and it reminded Will of nothing so much as a dark, threadbare blanket held up to an electric lamp. His eyes sought the familiar sight of Cassiopeia, perched upon her throne in the sky, and he watched her quiet journey across the heavens for so many hours that eventually she disappeared, and was replaced by the searching spread of dawn’s fingers.

But by the time morning came, Will wasn’t looking at the sky anymore. By the time morning came, Will’s view of the cosmos was replaced by that of a wide, flat sea, and he was no longer in his camp at all. He was sitting cross-legged on a ramshackle raft, surrounded by water on all sides, and he was waiting for something to happen. The sea surrounding him was utterly still, the glassy surface reflecting visions of Hannibal and Alana Lecter smiling and

intertwined. Will could not seem to look away from them. He was unable to move, scarcely able to breathe, and he felt as slack and as lifeless as the sails hanging limp behind him.

“I can’t do this,” a voice echoed to him from the deepest chasms of his mind, “I can’t do this anymore.”

Will isn’t sure how much time he spends that way, sitting cross-legged on his raft and waiting for something to happen. He comes back to himself in fits and starts, but the thread of time seems to be unspooling around him. One moment he is rinsing his face with the noonday sun high overhead, and the next moment he is collapsed against the side of his truck beneath a sunrise that he swears already happened. Other times, he is lurched back to consciousness in the midst of what seems like an endless night, Cassiopeia frozen and unmoving above him. There is no wind over the sea in his mind, no force to cut the string keeping him bound to his very own island of Calypso. And so he floats, and he waits, and he feasts his eye on the reflections of Hannibal and Alana Lecter until at last the water shows him someone else. She brings movement to the air around him, a stirring of the softest breeze, carrying her voice over the water.

“Mister Graham?” she calls, and Will tears his eyes away from the surface of the still sea, from the sight of her wide dark eyes and the crease between her eyebrows. “Mister Graham?” she calls again, and Will finds himself suddenly back in Redlands, blinking against the rivulets of sweat streaming down his forehead. He has no idea what time it is, or the last time he ate. He is sitting with his knees pulled up to his chest in the dirt, and there is a woman standing before him. It’s the same woman he’d seen reflected on the water: tall, beautiful, and draped with the unmistakable pallor of the unwell.

Not an hallucination, then, Will thinks, and he counts it as a not inconsiderable victory. *She’s real.*

“Mister Graham?” the woman says again, and Will swallows against the parched roughness at the back of his throat.

“Yeah?” he manages to say, and the woman stands up straighter. In her high-heeled shoes, Will suspects that she is taller than he is.

“You *are* Will Graham?” she asks, and Will scrubs his hands over his face. It has finally occurred to him to be alarmed.

“Who’s asking?” he grits out, and the woman clears her throat.

“My name is Bella Crawford,” she tells him. “I’m Sheriff Crawford’s wife.”

Will feels his face move involuntarily, too surprised by her words to suppress the reaction. He would have sooner expected *Alana Lecter* to appear here than her.

“What are you doing in my camp, Mrs. Crawford?” he asks, and she meets his gaze. Her eyes are wide and calm, the color of rich soil after a cleansing rain. The breeze begins to gain momentum in Will’s mind, pressing ripples across the surface of the sea.

“I wanted to meet the man who’s been causing my husband so much grief,” she tells him, and she moves her gaze over his body. “All told, Mister Graham, you’re not what I expected.”

Will can’t help but grimace at her words. He is filthy, exhausted, and half out of his mind: it doesn’t take a great deal of insight to imagine what she must see in him.

“Oh yeah?” he manages to say. “And what were you expecting?” She presses her lips together, as if deciding how much to reveal.

“To hear my husband tell it, you’re a vicious killer, Mister Graham,” she says after a moment, and Will lets out an awkward bark of a laugh.

“And you disagree, I take it?” he asks, his words dripping with bitterness. Bella Crawford does not respond, so Will looks away from her. In the ensuing silence, he realizes that his hands are bloody, laced with small wounds he has no memory of receiving.

“You don’t look like a killer to me, Mister Graham,” Bella Crawford says at last. “You look like a man so desperate for love he’s got it coming out of his ears.”

Will stiffens at her words, feels a sharp lance of pain through his abdomen. There was a time, he thinks, when he’d had a mask to protect himself from this sort of exposure. That time seems inconceivably distant to him now.

“This is a nice camp you have here, Mister Graham,” she continues, looking around. “Quiet. Do you mind if I stay here a while?”

Will presses his lips together, considering the request. Bella Crawford makes him uneasy with all her poised reserve and her quiet perception. He thinks that she is far more dangerous to him than her husband will ever be, and he debates the wisdom of letting her stay.

“Suit yourself,” he says, and she gives him a gracious nod. He watches as she settles gracefully into the dirt beside him, and he thinks that perhaps he has always been more lonely than wise. It would explain a lot about his life.

Silence falls between them, and Will turns his gaze to the horizon. There’s an Arroyo willow in the distance, emblazoned with gold against the rising sun, and Will fixes his gaze on it, savoring the way its branches seem to be lit from behind like hundreds of little candles. Bella is quiet beside him, and all is stifling and still for so long that he wonders if she’s fallen asleep.

“I’m sick, Mister Graham,” she says at length. “I have a *disease*. I’ve known about it for months. I’ve known about it since before you came here. In fact, if it weren’t for you, I suspect I would have had a much harder time hiding it from my husband. I suppose I should thank you for showing up when you did. You *distracted* him.”

Will clears his throat. He has no idea what to say to this. “Does this *disease* have a cure?” he finally settles on, and Bella lets out a sharp approximation of a laugh.

"*Death* is the cure, Mister Graham," she tells him. "The only question is what I'm supposed to do until that *cure* arrives."

Will presses his lips together, and he wonders what Bella Crawford is doing in his camp. He assumed she'd come here on behalf of her husband, but it appears he was mistaken. "Are you ever going to tell Sheriff Crawford?" he asks, and she lets out a slow breath.

"I'm not sure what good it would do to tell him," she confesses.

"What about the good it might do *you*?" Will asks, but she scoffs at the question.

"My husband would try to fight my disease the way he's fought every battle in his life," she says. "He would try to use brute force, and all that would come from it would be more suffering. I don't want it to be that way, Mister Graham. This isn't a war I can win. I *know* that. I *accept* it, but I know Jack never could."

Will rubs his fingers against the fabric of his filthy trousers, trying to figure out what to say. "What will you do?" he asks, and she lets out a slow breath.

"It is a difficult thing, Mister Graham," she says. "I can't figure out if it's harder to keep going, or to admit to myself that I'm done. It seems… irresponsible, to continue, now. I'm not like my husband. I don't try to fight battles I know I can't win. Why slog through the bloodshed, *day after day*, knowing that it's only going to get uglier? Knowing that I've already lost the war?"

Will feels a movement like a scaled creature uncoiling in the pit of his stomach; he feels an Etesian breeze beginning to stir the sails in his mind. He understands Bella Crawford's predicament far better than she can imagine.

"What other option do you have?" he asks, and if he is thinking of himself and Hannibal, he gives no indication. Bella draws in a breath.

"I want to make... a *noble retreat* from this life, Mister Graham," she says. "Do you understand? I don't want my departure from my husband's world to be the *subject* of the scene. I want to step out through stage left and let his show go on without me. Is that such a bad thing?"

Will keeps his eyes fixed on the Arroyo willow in the distance. *A noble retreat*, he thinks, feeling the touch of trade winds on his face, thinking of how happy Hannibal had been, arm-in-arm with his wife at the carnival. *Stepping out through stage left and letting his show go on without me. Now* there's *a thought.*

"I *love* my husband, Mister Graham," Bella continues, "and isn't the kindest thing we can do for the people we love to let them go? Not to force them to *linger* over something we *know* is in inevitable decline?"

Her words plunge like diving birds beneath the water in Will's mind, spreading themselves out like vines, like skeins of yarn unspooling. They shatter the reflections of Hannibal and Alana Lecter smiling on the water, and at last Will can tear his eyes away from them for

good. He can turn his gaze instead to the sails of his small craft, to how they are whipping now with the force of winds so swift and strong that his raft is lurching underneath him. *She's right,* Will thinks. *She's right.*

"If I have my way," Bella continues, "I'll step out through stage left, and one day my husband will wake up and I just won't be there anymore. He can go on living, and I can make my retreat knowing that I did so on my own terms."

The cracked bell gives a weak, tired chime in Will's mind. He imagines Hannibal moving through the blissful fabric of his chosen life, caring for patients at the hospital and then going home to his perfect house and his perfect wife day after day, until at last one night he realizes that he hasn't seen Will for months. And maybe then he will discover the truth about Will's departure, but by then it won't matter. Because by then, Will will be little more than a memory to Hannibal, like the color of a previous summer's sun fading from his skin. Will just won't be there anymore, and it will be the best thing for both of them. He stares down at his wounded hands, and he realizes that they've begun to shake.

"Are you sure about this, Mrs. Crawford?" he asks, and she lets out another scoff beside him.

"'*Mrs. Crawford,*'" she repeats, and she shakes her head. "Please, Mister Graham, I've just revealed my darkest secret to you. Call me *Bella*."

"Bella," Will echoes, and he bites his lip. "It's a lovely name."

"I know it is," she tells him, "and it's not even my real name. It's the name my *husband* gave me. It's the name of the woman I'd like him to remember once I'm gone. I want him to remember *her*, Mister Graham, not the woman I'll become if I let the battle go on. Do you understand?" she asks, but although Will can feel that she is looking at him, he can't bring himself to meet her gaze. The sails on his raft are taut and billowing, straining themselves toward movement. The only thing holding them back is the thread: gossamer-thin and translucent, binding him to his island of Calypso.

"We can't control the way we're remembered, Bella," he whispers. His voice is uneven, his heartbeat an unsteady gallop in his chest. "As much as we might wish we could." He can still feel the weight of her gaze on his face, but he doesn't look at her.

"There is an instinct in us to fight hardest for the things we know are futile, Mister Graham," she says slowly. "That's the instinct I'm trying to overcome."

"I can see the wisdom in that," Will replies, and Bella clears her throat.

"I don't mean to overstep, Mister Graham," she says. "I don't know you and you don't know me, but you've let me take a weight off my chest that I didn't even know was there. You've helped me, so it seems only fair if I try to help you back." Will keeps his eyes on his hands.

"Help me how?" he asks, and she draws in a breath.

"Do you want to know why I *really* came here?" she says. "I came here to decide for myself if you would be enough to distract my husband once I'm gone. I wanted to make sure this

war he's fighting with you would be a lifeline, a battle he could cling to to make up for the one I didn't let him fight. But I've changed my mind, Mister Graham. I don't think you should stay here anymore. Whatever it is that's keeping you, it isn't worth it. There has to come a time when the fighting finally stops, when our minds win out over our instincts. I want that for myself, Mister Graham, and I want it for you too. Nothing can be gained from fighting battles we can't win."

Will presses a hand against his mouth, and in his mind, the gossamer-thin thread snaps. It is as though Bella has reached in and cut it. He is not bound to his island of Calypso anymore.

A noble retreat, Will thinks. *I can do that.*

"Thank you for letting me speak my thoughts, Mister Graham," Bella continues. "I can't tell you how helpful it's been for me. I love my husband, but sometimes he makes it hard to get a word in edgewise. It's been very good to talk with you."

Will swallows around the lump in his throat, around the taste of salt breezes that have already begun to bear him farther and farther away from Redlands. He won't stay here anymore.

"You don't have to thank me, Bella," he says. "I'm glad you came to see me."

"You're a kind man, Mister Graham," Bella tells him. "I'm sorry for the pain my husband put you through." Will feels his face move, shifting like currents beneath deep water, and he meets Bella's gaze at last. Her eyes are earnest, shining and clear.

"Bella," he says, "may I ask you for a favor?"

"It depends on the favor," she replies.

"Can you drive me to the Verger Family Orphanage?" he asks, and she gives him a knowing look.

"I can do that, Mister Graham," she tells him. "When would you like to leave?"

Will looks around his camp. He doesn't want to pack. He doesn't want to take any of the things he's collected to wherever it is that he is going. He wants to leave all of this behind him, to slough it off like an ill-fitting skin. The air has begun to stir in the camp, the slightest breeze ruffling his hair, and Will thinks that he can smell a trace of salt upon it.

"Now," he tells her. He is ready to sail.

+++

H.

The courtyard in Hannibal's mind is overgrown. There is scarcely room to move in it, let alone to breathe, so he stays still instead and learns to savor the closeness. The once-bright garden is full of shadows, the trellised vines grown so thick and tangled that they obscure the sky. All around him, bursts of white bougainvillea emerge like constellations from a blanket of dark greenery, and Hannibal has the odd sense that he is suspended unmoving in the watery thickness of a night sky. Sound is muffled here, the fragrance of the blooms so overpowering that Hannibal fails to notice Will's approach until he sees him, sidling his way in among the reaching fingers of the vines and looking around himself with no small measure of amusement.

"Doing some *redecorating*, Doctor Lecter?" he asks, his voice curling in an imitation of Mason Verger's abrasive crow. "I *love* the direction you're going."

"Hello, Will," Hannibal says tightly.

"In all seriousness though, Doc," Will continues, "aren't you going to do something about this? This place is a wreck."

Hannibal looks down at his hands where they're folded across the surface of the table. Vines have begun to grow between the empty spaces in the wrought iron, and he curls his fingers around them like a lifeline. They help to ground him. As always, he finds Will's presence nearly overwhelming.

"I'm not sure I would know where to begin," he says, and the Will in his mind scoffs.

"Bull*shit*," he says, and he brushes a layer of fallen leaves off the other chair before seating himself. "I think you know exactly what to do, *Doctor Lecter*," he continues. "What I can't figure out is what's holding you back."

The Will in his mind is all familiarity and chiding, and Hannibal resents him for it. "You have a silver tongue, Will," he tells him. "You may speak all you like, but I've learned it's best not to listen to the things you say."

Will's eyebrows lift, and he gestures to the suffocating greenery around them with an incredulous look. "What, not even in here?" he asks, and Hannibal shakes his head.

"No Will," he replies. "Least of all 'in here.'"

At last, Will seems to understand. He sits up straighter in his seat, and his face folds into a frown.

"Then what am I doing here, Doc?" he asks, and Hannibal shrugs.

"Perhaps I needed to remind myself I made the right decision when I left your camp," he says, and Will shifts in his seat.

"So that's it, then?" he asks. "You're just going to keep living a life you hate because you're too afraid to take a risk?" Hannibal stiffens, and he fights to suppress the flare of white-hot

anger he feels at the unmasked accusation in Will's tone.

"Has it occurred to you that you are not a risk worth taking, Will?" he asks, but he regrets the words as soon as he has spoken them. The Will in his mind draws back as though struck, his throat moving and his eyes wide. He is quiet for several moments, as though trying to decide how best to respond.

"You know I only come here when you bring me, right Hannibal?" he says at last. "Why bother to do that if all you're going to do is insult me? You could just as easily do *that* in the real world."

Hannibal wraps his fingers more tightly around the vines, warns himself not to fall victim to the affectation of hurt in Will's tone. But his ability to resist Will is faulty at best, and he finds his lips moving without his permission. "Why did you say please?" he asks, and Will tilts his head at the words.

"What?" he says, and Hannibal leans forward across the table.

"That night in your camp," he presses. "You said 'Stay with me. *Please*.' Why did you say please?"

Will's face moves, and for a moment it appears that he will answer in earnest. But then he draws back, and his features harden. Hannibal has wounded him, and put him on his guard. Will bites his lower lip, and Hannibal tries hard not to stare at the tantalizing sight of teeth pressing against pink skin.

"Why do you *think* I said it?" Will counters, and Hannibal feels his face curl.

"I don't know why you said it, Will, " he replies, and Will glares at him.

"I don't believe that, *Doctor Lecter*," he tells him. "I think you know perfectly well why I said it, but you're so afraid of being wrong that you won't accept it."

"You will admit that sincerity is not your strong suit, Will," Hannibal says. "You can hardly fault me for having doubts."

"But what if you're right?" Will asks. "What if I *did* mean it?"

Hannibal swallows against the sharp, piercing sting of longing that that particular question evokes, ignores the way it seems to make the greenery draw closer and more suffocating around them.

"I find that I am more concerned with what will happen if I'm wrong then I am enticed by what will happen if I'm right," he says, and Will scrubs a hand over his face.

"So why'd you bring me here then, Hannibal?" he asks. "Am I supposed to try to convince you?"

Hannibal turns his gaze to the tangled branches overhead and remains silent.

"*Hannibal*," Will says, his voice sharper now, more insistent, "it's been *days*. How much longer are you going to make me wait?"

Hannibal ignores the question. He has no answer for Will; at least, no answer he intends to share. There are cicadas singing in the distance, a steady drone that grows so deafening it seems to consume what little air is left around them. Hannibal does not know how much time has passed before he realizes he can no longer hear Will breathing.

"Will?" he asks, but when he turns his head he finds that Will is gone, and in his place only a thick tangle of branches. "Will?" he says again, but there is no reply. He sees the glint of blue eyes moving beneath a thicket of dark leaves and springs forward, reaching out desperate fingers to tear at the vines covering Will's face. "Will," he says again, but his efforts are futile. No matter how quickly he tears at the branches, new ones spring to life to take their place. The light in Will's eyes is fading, and Hannibal is powerless to stop it.

This is no better than the fourth world, he thinks, *just a different kind of death.*

"Hannibal," Will manages to say, his breath fluttering the leaves that frame his face, "*please*." And then he is gone, and all that remains in his place is an impenetrable mass of tangled, thorny vines. Hannibal begins to tear at them with savage ferocity, scarcely aware of the thorns digging bloody valleys into his fingers. He has to get Will *out*.

"Hannibal," a voice calls, and suddenly the garden is gone. He is back in his office, and Doctor Sutcliffe is hovering near him with an uncertain expression. Hannibal's fingers are clenched tightly around the heart-shaped toy he'd won at the carnival, his palms wet with sweat. "Hannibal?" Doctor Sutcliffe says, and Hannibal forces himself to speak. His breath is rapid and uneven.

"Yes, Doctor Sutcliffe?" he manages to say, and Sutcliffe clears his throat.

"Ah, are you okay?" he asks. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm perfectly well, Doctor Sutcliffe," Hannibal tells him, willing his heartbeat to slow, "thank you for asking."

"Are you *sure*?" Sutcliffe presses, and Hannibal bristles at the insistence. "Morning rounds were supposed to start fifteen minutes ago, Hannibal," Sutcliffe continues. "You've never been late for them before."

"I apologize, Doctor Sutcliffe," Hannibal says. "I'm afraid I was simply lost in thought."

"It's not a problem, Hannibal," Sutcliffe says, "but are you *sure* you're okay? Do you want to take the day off?"

"I'm quite certain, Doctor Sutcliffe," Hannibal says, and he rises to stand. "Let us begin our rounds. We're already behind schedule." He releases his fingers from the heart-shaped toy and places it down gently on the surface of his desk. It seems to call to him as he walks away from it.

This is no better than the fourth world, it seems to whisper, *just a different kind of death.*

+++

W.

Will arrives at the Verger Family Orphanage with a trade wind at his back and the taste of salt water on his tongue. The orphanage is eerily quiet, but he pays it little mind. He has other things to occupy his thoughts at the moment: the upcoming journey, for example, and figuring out where he can go to hitch a ride without attracting any attention. He has little preference in terms of destination, now; in fact, he's content to follow whatever path the wind chooses to send him down. That being said, he would prefer to cast off from a place where no watching eyes can observe his going and report it back to Jack Crawford. He knocks on Margot's door gently, wary of violating the silence.

"Hello, Will," Margot says, her face creasing with concern. "Come in." She steps aside to let him pass, and she locks the door behind him with a quiet *click* before making her way back to her desk. She sits down slowly and draws in a deep breath. "Will, are you okay?" she asks, and Will finds that he is too tired to lie to her.

"No, Margot," he says. "I'm not." Margot's entire body grows tense at his words, and she leans forward in her chair.

"What do you mean, Will?" she asks. "What happened? Is it Mason? Has he-"

"It's not Mason," Will says quickly, and Margot slumps back in her chair with a rough, harsh laugh.

"Okay then," she says, shaking her head. "Hannibal? You two had some sort of… falling out?"

Will grimaces. It sounds so melodramatic when she puts it that way, but he supposes it's the truth. (Or, at least, it's as close to the truth as Margot is ever going to get.)

"Yeah," he says after a moment, "we had a falling out."

"Tell me about it," Margot says. "I'm sure I can help you work through it."

"I don't want to 'work through it', Margot," Will whispers. "Not anymore." Margot's brows draw together, her eyes searching.

"What do you mean, Will?" she asks, and Will sighs.

“I mean that I’m leaving, Margot,” he tells her. “I came to say goodbye to you and Abigail, and then I’m hitching a ride out of Redlands forever.”

Margot goes very still. Her eyes grow wide, and all the color drains from her face. She seems to be taking the news far harder than Will had expected.

“You can’t leave, Will,” she says, and Will shifts uncomfortably on his feet.

“Yes I can, Margot,” he tells her. “I know you’re worried about Mason, but your brother won’t be able to find me, I promise. I know how to make myself disappear.” Margot begins to tap her heel against the floor, her pace almost manic.

“What about Abigail?” she asks. “You can’t just leave her.”

Will grimaces at her words, and he swallows against the acrid burn of guilt and shame bubbling up the back of his throat. “I’m a bad influence on Abigail, Margot,” he forces himself to say. “She’ll be better off without me.” Margot rises to stand in a jerky movement.

“What about Hannibal?” she asks, and Will sighs.

“Hannibal will be better off without me too,” he tells her, and Margot steps out from behind her desk.

“I don’t understand why this is happening, Will,” she says, her voice oddly strained. “A few days ago you had love bites all over your neck, and now you’re leaving town just like that? What happened? What are you not telling me?”

“Nothing ‘happened’, Margot,” Will lies. “I just changed my mind, that’s all.” Margot steps closer to him in a sudden movement, reaching for his shoulders.

“Any chance you’ll change your mind *back*?” she snaps, and Will draws away from her in shock.

“Margot,” he says, “why are you-”

“I’m sorry, Will,” she says quickly, releasing him and pressing her hands against her face. “I’m sorry. Just - give me a moment to process this, okay? It’s… a shock, for me.”

“Okay, Margot,” he says slowly, and he watches with a distinct sense of unease as she begins to pace along the length of the Oriental rug beneath their feet. Several minutes pass this way, with the only sound in the room coming from the grandfather clock ticking placidly in the corner, until at last Margot draws in a breath and sits back down at her desk.

“Okay," she says slowly, “okay. First, let me apologize for my behavior, Will. I admit that I’ve grown… used to you, in the time you’ve been here. I consider you a friend - one of the very few I’ve ever had. I’m sad to see you go, and it made me lash out. I’m sorry.” Will shrugs. He finds that he has already forgiven her.

“It’s okay, Margot,” he tells her. “Most living things lash out when they’re hurting.”

“Yes they do,” she says, seemingly more to herself than to him. “Yes they do.”

Will remembers, suddenly, his first visit to the Verger Family Orphanage, when Margot had broken down crying right in front of him and he'd tried to offer her a word of advice on her predicament. He opens his mouth to speak, but she shakes her head and seems to come back to herself abruptly.

“Now that I’ve apologized, Will,” she says, “I want to ask you something. Do you have any plans for what you’re going to do when you leave Redlands?” she asks, and Will shifts on his feet again, suddenly embarrassed.

This is how I operate, Margot, he thinks. *I don’t make ‘plans’ when I’m fleeing town with my tail between my legs.*

“No,” he admits. “I don’t.”

“Do you have any money?” she asks, and he shakes his head.

“Not much,” he tells her. “But don’t worry about that, Margot. I’m used to it.” She clears her throat.

“May I make an assumption, Will?” she asks, and Will feels his shoulders grow stiff.

“It depends on the assumption, Margot,” he says slowly, and he watches her lean forward across her desk.

“I *assume* that you are leaving Redlands because you’ve finally realized that you don’t really know Hannibal Lecter at all,” she says, and Will feels as though the ground has lurched beneath his feet. “Don’t look so surprised, Will,” Margot chides. “I’ve known Hannibal for years. He doesn’t make himself an easy person to know.”

“What are you getting at, Margot?” Will asks, and she draws in a breath.

“Do you want to *know* Hannibal, Will?” she says. “The *truth* of him?” Will’s heart begins to pound, and he struggles to keep his face still.

“Why do you ask?” he says, and Margot licks her lips.

“I ask because my brother has… contacts,” she replies, “and those contacts told us where to go if we ever need information about Hannibal’s past. They gave us names and addresses, verified by multiple parties. I can give them to you, Will, if that’s what you want. You can find out the truth for yourself.” Will presses a hand against his mouth. He has no idea how to respond.

“Why are you doing this, Margot?” he finally manages to say, and she sighs.

“It’s like I said, Will,” she tells him, “I don’t have many friends. I’d like to help one of the few I *do* have, if I can.”

“And where do these people live?” Will asks. He has become aware, suddenly, that the sea beneath his raft is riotous.

“One is in Paris, the other Florence,” Margot replies, and Will shakes his head.

“I don’t have the money to go to Europe, Margot,” he says, but she waves a hand dismissively at his words.

“Don’t worry about the money, Will,” she says. “I have more than enough of it, believe me. I’ll make sure the journey is paid for.”

“Margot,” Will says, reaching desperate fingers for the mast on the shuddering raft in his mind, “I’m not sure I can acce-”

“Do you have plans for where you’ll go after you talk to these people, Will?” Margot asks, and Will shakes his head. He wonders if she can hear the sound of sails whipping past his ears.

“No,” he says, “I don’t.” Margot draws in a breath and rises to stand, steeling her shoulders.

“I didn’t think so,” she replies, and Will watches in stunned silence as she makes her way across her office and comes to stand in front of a large oil painting. She slides the painting aside to reveal a safe, which she opens with a complex combination. Once it’s open, she withdraws something before closing it again, and she slides the painting back into place before returning to her desk.

It’s a key, Will realizes, *she has a key.*

“Margot,” he says quietly, “what are you doing?”

“This is my ‘go-bag’, Will,” she says slowly, and she uses the key to unlock a drawer in her desk. “It contains nine hundred dollars in cash and the key to a boarding house in Palermo.”

“Margot,” Will whispers, but she raises a hand to silence him and withdraws an envelope from the drawer.

“You may *think* that you can hide from him, Will,” she continues, “but trust me: you can’t. My brother has contacts all over the world, and they’re *always watching*. I’ve paid the rent for that room in the boarding house for *years*, and I’ve done everything in my power to make sure Mason and his spies don’t know about it. It’s the only place I’m sure he won’t be able to find you.”

“Margot,” Will says again, but she cuts him off.

“*All I ask* in return for the money and the key and the names, Will, is that you make me a promise,” she tells him.

“What promise, Margot?” Will asks, and she meets his gaze.

"*Promise me* you'll stay in Palermo until I send you a message there," she says. "I don't think you understand how… *upset* my brother will be when he finds out that you managed to slip away from him. I'll send word to you once the dust settles and he's found his next fixation, but until then, *promise me* you won't leave Palermo, Will. Promise me."

Will is silent, too stunned by the deluge of information she's just shared with him to form a coherent response. He is clinging to the mast of his raft like a lifeline, praying that it is enough to keep him afloat.

"Do you promise me, Will?" Margot says again, and, for a moment, Will nearly refuses her. For a moment, Will is nearly unwilling to accept the sacrifice she's making on his behalf. But then he considers what she's offering him, and he knows that the possibility of discovering the truth about Hannibal is an enticement too strong for him to resist. It always has been; that's why he let things get this bad in the first place.

"Will you look after Abigail?" he asks. "Make sure she finishes school? Make sure she's taken care of? That she's happy?"

"I'll do my best," Margot tells him, and Will draws in a breath.

"Then I promise you, Margot," he says, "once I get to Palermo, I'll stay there until I hear from you." Margot lets out a breath, her lips curving and her eyes shining.

"*Good*, Will," she says, and she reaches across the desk for his hand. "*Good*. Palermo is a coastal town, so I'm sure you could get work if you wanted to. You don't have to speak Italian to catch fish."

"Margot," Will begins, "about the money, really, you don't have to gi-"

"*Don't* try to change my mind, Will," she says sharply. "I want you to take all of it. The address to the boarding house is in the envelope too, so you don't have to worry about tracking it down." She releases his hand and reaches back into the drawer, withdrawing a piece of paper. "And here are the names and addresses of the people you can talk to about Hannibal. In all the years my brother has spent looking, he's only been able to find two: Bedelia du Maurier and Rinaldo Pazzi. It's not much to go on, but if my brother's sources are correct, they'll be able to answer whatever questions you have about Hannibal."

"Bedelia du Maurier," Will echoes, staring at the paper. "Rinaldo Pazzi. Who are they?"

"Bedelia is an old lover of Hannibal's, I think," Margot says, "and Pazzi was an investigator for the *polizia* while Hannibal lived in Florence. Other than that," she continues, "I honestly don't know." She hands him the envelope and the piece of paper, and Will takes them both with gentle fingers.

Bedelia du Maurier, he thinks, *Rinaldo Pazzi*. *Time to meet some of Hannibal's ghosts.*

"Margot," he whispers, "I can't thank you enough for what you're doing for me. I-"

“Don’t mention it, Will,” she says. “Please.” Will draws in a breath. The sea in his mind has begun to calm, the winds focused now in one direction.

“I guess this is it, then,” he says after a moment. “I’ll say goodbye to Abigail and-”

“Will,” Margot says gently, and he can already tell from her tone what she is going to say. His fingers tighten around the envelope and the piece of paper, and his throat moves convulsively.

“You don’t think I should say goodbye to Abigail?” he asks, and his voice comes out rough and unsteady. Margot sighs.

“No, Will,” she says, “I don’t.” Will’s stomach heaves, and he tastes the acrid burn of bile at the back of his throat.

Leave without saying goodbye? He thinks. *I can’t do that. I’d be abandoning her, leaving her behind with no warning. I can’t - I can’t -*

“*Will*,” Margot says, and he forces himself to meet her gaze. “I don’t think you understand the lengths my brother will go to when he’s trying to find you. He wouldn’t *hesitate* to harm a child. Trust me: the less Abigail knows about you leaving, the better.”

Will’s hands have begun to shake, the Oriental rug at his feet grown blurry and distorted. “Can I take her with me?” he asks, and Margot sighs.

“Think about the life you’ll be leading, Will,” she says gently. “I can’t let you take her with you. It's too dangerous.”

Will listens to Margot speak, and he recalls Bella’s words from earlier in the day: *“Isn’t the kindest thing we can do for the people we love to let them go?”* He blinks back the tears pooling at the edges of his eyes and he draws in a shuddering breath.

You’re doing what’s best for Abigail, he tells himself. *She may not understand it now, but she will when she’s older.*

“Okay Margot,” he grits out, “okay. Just - if Abigail asks, will you tell her I’m sorry?” Margot’s face twists with sympathy, but she shakes her head.

“No, Will,” she tells him. “I’m not going to tell her that we spoke. It’s the only way to keep her safe.”

Will feels as though he might be sick, and he struggles to breathe around the fronds of desperation uncoiling up the back of his throat. *That is what you do, Will,* Hannibal’s voice echoes to him across the water. *You shatter things and leave it to others to pick up the pieces.*

“Okay,” Will says, and his voice comes out a croak. “Okay.” Margot rises to stand.

“I can give you a ride to the bus station, Will,” she tells him. “From there, I recommend you take a Greyhound to Los Angeles, and then a train to New York. Once you get to New York you can take your pick of cruise liners to Europe. I recommend Cunard. The *Mauretania* is particularly delightful.”

“Thank you, Margot,” Will says, but in truth he hardly hears her. She steps out from behind her desk.

“If you want my advice, Will,” she continues, “I’d say you should buy a new set of clothes and clean yourself up in Los Angeles. You might attract more attention than you want to if you keep looking the way you do right now.”

Will looks down at his body, taking in the filthy clothes, the scabbed hands, the worn boots. So many months have passed since he arrived in Redlands, and yet he feels as though he is right back where he started.

“Margot,” he says softly, “why is it so quiet?”

“Haven’t you heard, Will?” she asks, gesturing to the window. There are clouds gathering overhead, low and dark over the dun-colored mountains in the distance. “Calm before the storm.”

Evil Minds

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! This is the last chapter of the second act of this story, and I am so excited to share it with you. There is some graphic violence in the last section, so those of you who are squeamish: take note! Also in this chapter you will find a whole lot of angst and drama and a clue as to who the other killer is :O. Buckle up!!

In the meantime, thanks as always to those of you who have commented and kudosed on this fic!! I hope you enjoy this chapter, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts if you choose to share them <3<3. Happy reading!

H.

There are many things one knows better than to do, and for Hannibal that list is far longer than most. For Hannibal, the list of things he knows better than to do is the framework by which he has lived his life for nearly seven years. It served as the blueprint for the person suit he built to shelter himself from urges that would compel him to do precisely those things he knows that he should not: to hunt, to murder, and to consume; to create and to destroy. It was the list of things he knows he should not do that allowed Hannibal to hang with such certainty the suspended strings of expectation. It was the list of things he knows he should not do that gave him the counterbalance he needed to ensure his whole elaborate structure did not crumble to the earth. The list of things he knows he should not do has been Hannibal's guidebook, his compass and his atlas. It has been the sole driving force which has propelled him through his life since he left Florence, and it has served him well. For nearly seven years it has given him a life of certainty - a life of order, and of routine, and of a complete and utter lack of surprises. But the list of things he should not do is proving to be less thorough than Hannibal had once believed it to be. There are gaps in the list, areas where the text is smudged or missing altogether. As a blueprint, it was faulty, and Hannibal is paying the price for its deficiencies now.

For when Hannibal had built his person suit, he had done so in anticipation of the challenges that the list of things he should not do warned him to expect. If a ghost appeared from his violent past, Hannibal knew that he should not seek murder as a means to ameliorate the problem. If his life became maddeningly polite, Hannibal knew that he should not seek disorder as a means of escaping it. If he found himself unsatisfied in his marriage, Hannibal knew that he should not risk the security it brings him by seeking a new life elsewhere. Hannibal was *prepared* for these eventualities, and the list of the things he knows he should

not do told him exactly how to react when faced with them. But the list of things he should not do did not account for the existence of Will Graham, and Hannibal's person suit was not designed to protect him from a man who need only say "*please"* to turn Hannibal's mind irrevocably against itself.

And *that* is the crux of the crisis in which Hannibal now finds himself.

Now, in the face of an altogether unexpected peril, the gears of Hannibal's machinery are failing. The architecture of his artifice is growing rusted and corroded from exposure to an element it was not designed to withstand, and the suspended strings of expectation have grown threadbare and taut against the increasing weight of his resentment. His world of order and of control and of routine, his world of only ever behaving counter to the ways he knows that he should not, has begun to feel as distant to him now as the blood-soaked alleyways of Florence, and he does not know how to get back to it. He is beginning to feel that, in the end, all of his forethought and his caution and his meticulous planning have been for nothing.

For Hannibal was prepared, *always* prepared, for the things he could predict, but he could never have predicted Will. He could never have predicted that he would one day find himself uncertain whether the very things he knows he should not do may in fact be the very things which hold the keys to his happiness. He could never have predicted that he would one day find himself believing to be possible all those things he had never previously even bothered to consider: the existence of a companion who might truly be capable of understanding him, or the possibility of a family that would mean as much to him as the one he lost so many long years ago. He could never have predicted the situation in which he now finds himself, and he does not know what to do now that he is here. All he knows is what he should not do, and that Will Graham has made him feel like a moth in the thrall of an electric lamp. He seems endlessly compelled to act in ways he knows that he should not.

For example, Hannibal *knows* that he should not rise from his desk and cross the room in an attempt to be closer to the specter of Will Graham that is standing in the corner. He *knows* that he should not allow himself to feast his eyes on the vision of Will with his feet planted and his hands in his pockets, staring ahead of himself with a winsome slope to his shoulders. He *knows* that he should not allow himself to wonder at Will's appearance: that Will's hair looks freshly washed, that Will's clothing is well-fitted and seems to be brand-new. He *knows* that he should not allow himself to think that Will looks absolutely captivating in this moment, and he *knows* that he should not step closer, hovering mere inches away as Will adjusts the collar of the jacket he wears. He *knows* that he should not reach out to touch Will, but so desperate is he for the intoxicating liquor of Will's nearness that he forgets, for a moment, that this Will is not real, and so he reaches cautious fingers out despite his better judgment. And then his fingers pass through empty space, and the specter of Will draws in one last breath before it disappears completely, and Hannibal finds himself alone again. He has done that which he knew better than to do, and now he pays the price for it.

Hannibal swallows against the chalky taste of ash on his tongue, against the bottomless sea of longing now churning in the pit of his stomach. And then he forces himself to move, settling into his desk chair again and reaching for the heart-shaped toy he'd won at the carnival. He forces himself to do these things instead of all the things that he would rather do: all the things he knows he should not do.

All the things he longs to do with every fiber of his being.

This is no better than the fourth world, Hannibal thinks, *just another kind of death*.

And so he is here, seated at his desk in the quiet sanctuary of his office, trying to decide whether to cling to the crumbling architecture of the life he's built or to fling himself blissfully onto the rocks of the things he knows he should not do. There are clouds rolling in overhead, thick and heavy and foreboding, and they look out of place against the delicate blue canvas of the sky. They loom above the dun-colored mountains in the distance as though an artist has smeared great black globs of oil paint over a watercolor, and Hannibal is captivated by the sight of them. Hannibal is captivated by the juxtaposition of light and dark, the juxtaposition of translucent blue and roiling gray. He has seen such duality before, of course, but only in the depths of Will Graham's eyes. There are many beauties in the world that seem only to be matched by Will Graham's eyes.

Hannibal thinks of the clouds in the distance, and he thinks of the beauty of Will Graham's eyes, and even though he knows better than to do it, he chooses to ignore the sound of knocking when it begins to rattle at his office door. He knows better than to do it, but he chooses not to speak when the knocking begins anew, and even when the presumptuous person tests the doorknob with their fingers.

Hannibal has locked it, of course. He is in no mood for company.

"Hannibal," Jack's voice calls to him from the hallway, "let me in, I need to talk to you."

Hannibal stays still and tries to ignore the piercing sting of expectation as it tugs like fish hooks beneath his skin. He tries to savor the few remaining moments he has left in which his only company need be thoughts of Will and the wine-dark clouds in the distance, and then he rises to stand. He sets the heart-shaped toy back down on his desk, and he propels himself like a bleeding marionette all the way across his office. And then he opens the door.

"Hello, Jack," he says, and he moves aside to let the man pass. Jack barrels into his office as though there is a demon at his heels, and Hannibal closes the door behind him with a gentle *click*.

"What brings you here today, Jack?" he asks, and Jack whirls around to face him.

"I need to ask a favor of you, Hannibal," he says, with all his usual brusqueness, and Hannibal feels his fingers tighten into fists against his sides.

"A favor," he repeats, and Jack nods. "What sort of a favor, Jack?"

(In truth, Hannibal suspects he already knows just what sort of a favor it will be, but he wants to hear Jack say it.)

"I need you to spend some time with Will Graham," Jack tells him, and Hannibal feels a scorching wind over dry deserts in his mind.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Jack," he says. "I'm very busy."

“Can’t you move some things around?” Jack asks. “Come on, Hannibal, this is important.” Hannibal draws in a breath. He is becoming very angry very quickly, his ability to control his temper yet another victim of the ailing machinery of his artifice.

“If I recall correctly, Jack,” he says, forcing his voice to remain steady, “the last time we spoke, you urged me to stay *away* from Will Graham.” Jack lets out a long-suffering sigh at his words.

“That is true,” he admits, “and my sentiment on that subject still stands. But the situation has *changed*, Hannibal. We need to work with what we’ve got.”

We, Hannibal thinks, and he feels a rippling coil of displeasure move like a breeze through tall grass in his mind. *We.*

“And what is that we’ve got, Jack?” he asks, and Jack meets his gaze.

“*Evidence*,” he says lowly, and Hannibal becomes aware, suddenly, of the sound of a ringing in the space behind his right ear.

“Evidence?” he repeats. “What kind of evidence?”

“*A murder weapon*,” Jack says, and he waves a blue folder that is gripped tight in his right hand. “The report just came back from the FBI.”

“A weapon?” Hannibal echoes. “It was my understanding that the guards were killed by spinal injury sustained through trauma to the neck.”

“No, no, the first one had his neck broken,” Jack says, his tone impatient. “The second one was strangled with a garrote, the third one killed by a gunshot to the head. We analyzed the bullet from the third body and finally tracked it down. We know where it came from now.”

The ringing behind Hannibal’s right ear is growing louder, and there is an unknown *something* hovering just above his shoulder, pressing long, wet tendrils of unease down the length of his spine. Despite his continued uncertainty that Will has ever killed anyone, despite his continued uncertainty that Will is anything more than a cockroach with a very hard shell, Hannibal still does not like where this conversation is going.

“And what did the FBI have to say about the bullet’s source?” he asks, and Jack’s face spreads into a grin.

“Needle in a haystack, Hannibal,” he replies. “It’s from an Italian handgun, a Beretta Model 1934. They’re manufactured for the Italian military, not the kind of gun you just find *lying around*.”

Hannibal presses his lips together, and he studies Jack across the space between them. Jack’s meaty shoulders are set, his eyes gleaming with a dark flame of righteousness.

“And how do you imagine Will came into possession of such a firearm, Jack?” he asks.

“Stolen from the corpse of Emilio Russo, Will’s second victim,” Jack replies. Each word is rounded and emphatic like a bullet. “To hear the other guards tell it, that gun was Emilio’s prize possession. He *always* kept it on him. But when we found his body: no gun.”

Hannibal licks his lips. Somewhere in the deepest parts of his mind, the beast is stirring to wakefulness in its cage. “It’s a fascinating theory, Jack,” he says, “but what does it have to do with me?” Jack steps closer to him.

“I need you to go to Will’s camp, Hannibal,” he says. “Catch him off guard, pretend to be paying him a medical call. Or hell, do it when you know he isn’t there. I don’t much care about the particulars. Just look around while you’re there, and if you see *any evidence* that he’s got that gun, you come straight to me.”

“I am not an expert in firearms, Jack,” Hannibal says. “I don’t know how to identify this gun of yours.”

But Jack is prepared for this line of resistance: he opens the blue folder and withdraws a photograph, extending it to Hannibal with an expectant look. Hannibal glances down at it and notices that his vision is limned in shades of red.

Jack is getting too close, a voice in his mind whispers. *He is going to tighten the noose around Will’s neck. Are you going to allow that to happen?*

“Jack,” Hannibal says, his lips moving before he is consciously aware of it, “have you considered that Mason is the killer? Or perhaps one of the other guards?” But Jack shakes his head.

“There’s no motive, Hannibal,” he says dismissively. “Mason’s only ever been after money, and he hates any kind of outside scrutiny on his operations. If this were an inside job, he would have hid it better. As for one of the other guards: why kill one of your own? And not just *one* of your own, but *three*?”

The ringing in the space behind Hannibal’s right ear has grown deafening, and the beast is pressing desperate fingers through the bars of its cage. *You know exactly how to solve this problem,* it whispers. *What I can't figure out is what's holding you back.*

“Jack,” Hannibal forces himself to say, “has it occurred to you that if you’re correct, and Will *is* the killer, then you’re asking me to put myself in a great deal of danger on your behalf?”

“Yes it has,” Jack says. “And I’ve decided it’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Of course he has, the beast whispers, and Hannibal straightens to his full height.

“I see,” he says evenly, and Jack lets out a breath.

“Oh come on, Hannibal,” he scoffs. “I know you can handle yourself. I remember what you did in that interrogation room. That guard was twice as big as Will, and heavily armed.”

Twice as big as Will and heavily armed, the beast whispers. *Just like Jack. It would be easy. I could make it so* easy.

“Nevertheless, Jack,” Hannibal hears himself say, “you may understand why I am hesitant to agree. Aside from the danger of what you’re asking, there is still the matter of ethics. I assume you’re sending *me* on this investigation because you still don’t have enough evidence to gain a full warrant.” Jack’s face folds, and he crosses his arms over his chest.

“I’ve decided that I'm willing to do whatever it takes to put Will Graham behind bars,” he says, “even if it means I have to skirt around a few laws in the process.”

It would be easy, the beast reminds him. *You haven’t lost your taste for it, have you?*

“If you are now willing to disregard the law, Jack, then why have you come to me?” Hannibal asks. “Why not ally yourself with Mason Verger? I imagine he would be helpful with such tactics.” Jack lets out a frustrated sound, and he turns to face Hannibal with an incredulous expression.

“Because Will Graham *trusts* you, Hannibal,” he says sharply. “Can’t you see that? He's trusted you since that day we brought him in for questioning. If there’s anyone in the world who has a chance of getting the *truth* from that man, it’s you.”

Hannibal goes preternaturally still. *Is Jack right?* he wonders. If he asked Will about the gun, would Will tell him the truth?

Could the gun be the tool Hannibal needs to peel away the layers of Will’s mask for good?

Could the gun mean an end to uncertainty? To indecision? To the tempting glint of sharp rocks, beckoning sweetly over the edge of the precipice?

Hannibal waits, and he wonders, and although he knows he should not do it, he makes a decision.

“Very well, Jack,” he says. “I’ll go to Will’s camp. I’ll ask about the gun.”

(And this is not a lie. Hannibal *will* go to Will’s camp, and he *will* ask about the gun, but the visit will have nothing to do with fulfilling a favor to Jack Crawford.)

“*Thank you*, Hannibal,” Jack says, and Hannibal wonders, suddenly, what happens to a moth in the moments just before it is incinerated by the very heat which lured it in.

Bliss?

Transcendence?

Enlightenment?

Destruction and rebirth, Hannibal thinks. *What a captivating thought.*

“Jack,” Hannibal says, even though he knows he should not do it, “for the sake of my own curiosity, may I ask what motive you ascribe to Will for these killings?”

Jack meets his gaze and holds it, his eyes fevered and glinting. “Will doesn’t have a motive,” he says gravely. “Will doesn’t need one. Evil minds don’t need a motive.”

Hannibal feels his eyebrows lift, and, although he knows he should not do it, he lets his lips curve up into a smile. “No,” he says, “I suppose they don’t.”

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W.

Will’s first thought upon arriving to Union Station in Los Angeles is that it reminds him of the hospital in Redlands, all pretty painted adobe gleaming white against the azure blue of the sky. There are tall, spindly palm trees lining the road outside, and beneath them a constant stream of cars is moving like gears in a well-oiled machine. Will stands outside admiring the view until eventually he is borne along the colorful tide of bodies through the vaulted doorway, and once inside he finds himself surrounded by the gleaming wood and polished marble of the grand lobby. It is beautiful here, unspeakably so, and all at once the immediacy of what he is doing presses down upon Will like a lead weight.

I’ll never see Hannibal again, he thinks, and his heartbeat tolls like a bell in his ears. *I’ll never see Abigail again.* The thought makes his vision go dark around the edges, but he tries to ignore that fact. He keeps his head down and his eyes on his bandaged hands, fearful that at any moment someone might approach him and ask him what he’s doing there. He buys his ticket to New York and seats himself in one of the plush leather chairs, and it is only after several minutes that he realizes all his fears are unfounded. For countless dozens of people have passed him by without sparing him a glance, and Will realizes that his time in Redlands has filled him with delusions of his own importance. He spent too many months longing to be the epicenter of someone else’s world; too many months spent hoping that in the midst of a teeming crowd, *he* might be the one sought out. But it only takes a few minutes in the lobby of Union Station for Will to be reminded that this is not the case, and he confronts the old, familiar reality of his own insignificance. He reminds himself that among the countless multitude of people that populate the earth, there is not a single one that calls him beloved.

I remember now, Will thinks, *I am nobody and nothing*, and it is the most like himself that he has felt in months.

There is late afternoon sunlight gleaming in through the tall windows that flank the lobby, and Will averts his gaze from it with a grimace. His head is throbbing, the stiff fabric of his newly-purchased clothing chafing at his skin. He’d done as Margot suggested once he got to Los Angeles, doing his best to clean himself in the bathroom at the bus station before stopping by a department store to purchase new clothes. He’d spent far more money than he needed to there, far more money than he had ever spent on clothing before, for he found himself gravitating toward items that reminded him of Hannibal: crisp white shirts that

hugged his skin, long pleated pants that emphasized the leanness of his torso. He'd even finished the ensemble with a jacket that just brushed the curve of his ass, and when he studied himself in the dressing room mirror he had to admit he looked good. There was even a moment, brief and electrifying, when he could have sworn that Hannibal was there in the dressing room with him, moving his eyes across his face and reaching out to touch him. But of course that was just Will's mind playing tricks on him, so he focused on the sight of his reflection in the mirror and made the decision to buy everything he wore. There was an irony to the situation that did not escape him: that he seemed to look his best, only when he felt his worst. That he seemed to look his best, only when he wondered what Hannibal might think if he could see him.

But Hannibal *won't* see him, Will reminds himself. That is the point of this entire exercise, the driving wind behind his sails. Hannibal won't see him ever again, and neither will Abigail, and it will be the best thing for both of them. Will repeats these words to himself like a mantra, and he continues to ignore the way they make his vision go dark around the edges. *I'm sure that'll go away eventually*, he tells himself.

(This is a lie, but it is not one he allows himself to think about.)

Will still can't remember the last time that he ate anything, but neither can he recall what it feels like to be hungry. As it stands, the thought of food disgusts him, so he continues to go without it. He shifts in his plush leather seat, and he can feel the cold barrel of Margot's handgun pressing against the skin of his low back. He hadn't wanted to take the gun from Margot, but she had been insistent, her eyes wide and grave when she parked her car several miles away from the bus station in Redlands.

"Margot," Will had said, looking around at the empty streets that surrounded them, "what are you doing?"

"Will," she had whispered, her face very still, "I want you to take a gun." Will had gone stiff in his seat at her words, his face twisting in a combination of surprise and disgust.

Will doesn't like guns. He never has. Guns lack *intimacy*, guns lack the pulsing immediacy that makes killing so intoxicating for him. Will doesn't like guns, and he wondered how on earth Margot even got her hands on one.

"I'm not going to take your gun, Margot," he said, and she drew in a long breath.

"I would feel better if you did, Will," she said slowly. "You don't know what might be hunting you."

"Margot," Will told her, "I'm not going to take your gun. I wouldn't know how to use it anyway."

(This was a lie, of course, but Margot didn't need to know that.)

"*Will*," she said in a tight voice, "I won't take you the rest of the way to the bus station until you agree to take the gun. *Please*."

Will studied her, then: the crease between her eyebrows, the coiled tension writ large across her every painted feature, and he sighed. “Fine, Margot,” he said, and her black-clad shoulders seemed to loosen at his words.

If nothing else, Will supposed, he could just wipe the gun and toss it in the nearest gutter once he made it to Los Angeles.

“*Thank you*, Will,” Margot said, and she leaned across his seat to reach into the glove box. She withdrew a small handgun and passed it to him without a word, and Will accepted it with a slowly unfurling sense of unease. The gun had a short handle and a thin barrel, so he supposed it would be easy enough to hide, but he still did not like the weight of it, he still did not like the shape it took against his bandaged palm.

“Margot,” he said slowly, studying the blocky text carved into the barrel, “where did you get this?”

Beretta, the gun read, *Mo. 1934.* Margot cleared her throat.

“My brother maintains a stockpile of munitions equivalent to that of a small European nation, Will,” she said. “It isn’t hard for me to get a gun. I’ll give you bullets, too. They’re kind of hard to find.”

“*Jesus*, Margot,” Will breathed, and he felt his face crease. “Are you going to be okay? What’s going to happen to you if Mason suspects you helped me leave?”

“Don’t worry about me, Will,” she said. “I have my ways of protecting myself.”

“Margot,” Will said, nowhere near convinced, but she reached for his hand and placed her fingers over the gun. They were stark against the smooth blackness, pale and spindly like the bones of a goldfinch.

“Remember the plan, Will,” Margot whispered. “Paris, then Florence, and then Palermo. Stay there until you hear from me. And don’t let this gun leave your side.”

“Okay Margot,” Will said, and she tightened her grip on his hand, pressing his fingers against the unfamiliar handle of the gun. She drew in an unsteady breath.

“And Will,” she said, meeting his gaze at last, “I’m so sorry.”

“None of this is your fault, Margot,” Will reminded her gently, and she bit her lip. There were tears in her eyes, smearing the dark makeup and making her look like a sad, tired ghost. Will wished that he could comfort her, but he didn’t know what else to say.

“Be that as it may, Will,” she whispered, “I’m still sorry.”

Will is jolted from the memory by the sudden sound of a voice crackling over the loudspeakers in the lobby. “Union Pacific train 244 to Grand Central Station in New York will depart from Terminal 3 in twenty minutes,” the voice announces, and Will looks down at his ticket. That’s his train. He rises to stand, picking up the small suitcase he’d purchased and holding it close against his side. Hidden within, tucked alongside the clothes he’d bought that

reminded him of Hannibal, is the box of bullets and Margot's "go-bag," Will's North Star on his voyage across the world. He's never been on a train before, but he supposes there's no time like the present.

He makes his way to the doorway of Terminal 3 and then out into the open air, and he stares up at the gleaming silver vessel that awaits him. It announces itself as *The Zephyr* in elegant font painted along the side, and Will moves his eyes to the tracks that glint below it. The sun is setting in the distance, casting them in an ethereal glow, and Will feels compelled, suddenly, to spread himself across them like a blanket.

"Where ya headed, sir?" a voice asks him, and Will turns his head. It's a station employee, an elderly man with a kind face.

"New York," Will tells him, and the man's face lifts in a grin.

"Ah, the Big Apple!" he cries. "What a city! Ever been?"

"No, I can't say I have," Will lies, and the man casts a fond look at the train.

"Well I wish you a safe journey, son," he says. "I hope you find what you're looking for out there!"

"Me too," Will says, and he shifts against the cold press of Margot's handgun at his back. "Me too."

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H.

There is an immensity to the darkness that is blanketing Will's camp. It is a darkness that has texture and depth; a darkness that has physical weight. It is a darkness that seems to be alive, thrumming in tandem with the sticky, tar-black roiling beneath Hannibal's skin.

Hannibal is well-acquainted with this kind of darkness, although it's been some years since he encountered it. Not since the long-ago alleyways of Florence has he found himself sheltered within it, and he wonders whether he should take its presence here as an omen.

After all, he thinks, this kind of darkness has less to do with the midnight hour and more to do with all the things that one might do within it. The question is: what *will* he do within it?

He is here, after all. He has come to Will's camp in an act of blatant and irrevocable disregard for the wisdom of things he knows better than to do. He has packed a suitcase planning for an escape he knows better than to long for, and he has come seeking an outcome he knows better than to allow himself to want. He is getting out of his car in the living darkness of Will's

camp despite knowing better than to do so, and he is moving through the blackness to Will's cabin even though he knows there can be no going back. He is a moth caught in the thrall of Will's electric lamp, and he wonders how much of himself will be left once he is incinerated.

Hannibal knocks on the door to Will's small cabin, and, although he knows better than to do so, he does not allow himself to be concerned when there is no sound of movement within. He does not allow himself to be concerned when he knocks again, harder this time, and still is met with only cavernous, echoing silence. He does not allow himself to be concerned when he presses the flimsy door open and finds the cabin empty. He does not allow himself to be concerned when he seats himself on the narrow cot and wonders whether Will might be at the migrant camp, making love to that faceless woman. He does not allow himself to be concerned when hours pass with still no sign, and it is not until he hears the sound of movement outside the cabin door that he allows the demon of doubt to creep in. It is not until the cabin door rattles open and reveals a man that is not Will that the noxious stench of the fourth world suffuses Hannibal's every pore, and it is not until the man who is not Will heaves his way up into the cabin that the unknown *something* hovering above Hannibal's shoulder leans down and whispers, with unbearable and deafening clarity, that Will is gone, that Will is never coming back.

It is only then that Hannibal becomes aware of a piercing ring resounding in the space behind his right ear, and that the beast in his mind is flinging itself in steady paroxysms against the bars of its cage. It is not until the black-clad stranger lurches forward, swaying on unsteady legs and slurring in a drunken blend of English and Italian, that Hannibal realizes what is about to happen. "You killed my best friend, you bastard," the man slurs, and swift as a cutting breeze Hannibal can see the glint of a knife moving through the darkness. "Mason Verger can't keep me from taking my revenge," the man spits, and time seems to go very still around Hannibal.

He feels the heat of a cinder carried on a breeze across parched deserts in his mind. He feels the movement of a tar-black sludge beneath his skin, and, although he knows he should not do it, he allows himself at last to consider the unthinkable possibility: that possibility that is no longer possible. He allows himself to consider his dream for a life with Will: a house by the sea, days spent in comfortable companionship and nights spent in endless, sticky couplings. A life with Will, spent moving together through the darkness like a beast with two backs, unrepentant and unafraid of the heady liquor of brutality and violence, unashamed of their shared ability to savor it like a fine wine.

Hannibal and Will: seen and seeing, known and knowing, two halves of one soul, unparted until the end of their days.

All that might have been, in some other world, and all that will not be in this one. For, despite not knowing the way to the fourth world, Hannibal has found himself here anyway, and he knows there is no coming back from it.

And so, although he knows he should not do it, Hannibal allows himself to consider this unthinkable possibility now, faced with the sharp glint of a wavering knife in the darkness. This man has come to kill Will Graham, he knows, to claim his revenge for the death of a person he loved, and Hannibal considers how best to proceed. He *knows* he should not kill

this man. He has a logical excuse for being here, after all: he can simply tell Mason Verger he was doing Jack Crawford's bidding and sneaking out under cover to night look for the missing gun. And in the world of order and expectation, that is precisely what Hannibal would do. He would warn this drunken guard of his mistake, would drive him back to the Verger estate with a strong word to his employer about his conduct, and in the morning he would visit Jack Crawford and tell him that Will Graham is long gone.

There is no reason for Hannibal to kill this man, no reason at all. There is no reason for Hannibal to kill this man, except for the fact that the beast in his mind is hungry, and keening from the loss of an unthinkable possibility. There is no reason for Hannibal to kill this man, except for the fact that the tar-black sludge beneath his skin has caught on fire, and he feels as though his entire body is wreathed in flame. There is no reason for Hannibal to kill this man, except for the fact that Will is *gone*, except for the fact that Will is a liar and a snake and a silver-tongued siren, and that Hannibal has found himself in the fourth world despite the fact that he knew better all along.

There is no reason for Hannibal to kill this man at all, except for the fact that he *wants* to. Except for the fact that he needs no other reason.

After all, he thinks, remembering Jack Crawford's words, *evil minds don't need a motive*.

And so, even though he knows he should not do it, Hannibal reaches into the dark places of his mind, places he has not allowed himself to venture for nearly seven years, and he withdraws a key. He slides the key into the lock of a cage that is battered and scarred from the writhing of the creature within it, and he releases the beast from its prison. And then, although he knows he should not do it, Hannibal surges forth into the darkness, and he catches the man's wrist in his hand. He shifts it back in an unnatural twist and he listens with a sense of fathomless satisfaction to the sound of the knife hitting the floor at their feet. The man lets out a caterwaul and staggers back against the cabin door, and, although Hannibal knows he should not do it, he allows his person suit to fall away piece by piece. He allows himself to feel the strain of seven long years of hunger and the inconceivable weight of his artifice lift from his shoulders, and when he moves his limbs again he finds that they are no longer pierced by the suspended strings of expectation. He finds that they are light again, and graceful, and able to move whichever way he wills them. He is himself again, for the first time in seven years, and the beast lets out a happy purr in his mind.

What are you waiting for? It whispers. *You haven't lost your taste for it, have you?*

And so, although he knows better than to do it, Hannibal steps forward again in the darkness, and he gives the man against the door a smile that is all teeth. The man lets out a choked sound, and he reaches clumsy fingers for the gun at his belt. But his movements are slowed by drink, awkward and unsteady, and so it is easy, so *easy* for Hannibal to reach across the space between them and swat the gun away. It is so *easy* for him to reach for the man's throat, and then to wrap his fingers tight around it, and then to break the man's neck as easily as snapping an ear of corn, savoring the satisfying *crunch*. The man crumples to the ground at his feet and Hannibal follows him down, coming to his knees and picking up the knife where it rests on the floor. He shifts the man's body, cutting away the fabric that covers his left pectoral, and he uses the heavy heft of the blade to strike through sternum, to gouge a hole

through bone and flesh until he is able to cut out the man's heart. Hannibal's chest is heaving, his entire body covered in blood, and he leaves the corpse splayed out on the cabin floor when he steps outside to light a fire. He roasts the man's heart over an open flame, feeling an ache at the back of his throat and a longing that seems to unfurl itself through every burning inch of his limbs.

Will is gone.

Will has left him.

Will has lied to him, and tricked him, and turned his mind against itself, and now there is no recourse left to Hannibal at all except to help Mason Verger find Will Graham and kill him.

Hannibal gnaws at the man's heart with his teeth, standing in the middle of Will's abandoned camp, and he tries to orient himself to the reality of living the rest of his days trapped in the fourth world. And, although he knows better than to do it, he finds he cannot help but think of the shuddering, teeming memories that surround him here in the darkness. He finds he cannot help but think of the shape of Will's white neck, moving in the firelight. He finds he cannot help but think of the intoxicating scent of Will's hair, and of the way Will's eyes would sometimes shine like light through sculpted glass. He finds he cannot help but think of the way that Will would sometimes cling to him like a sweet-smelling vine in his sleep, and the way that Will's voice had seemed to sink heavy talons in his chest when he'd murmured "I won't leave you, Hannibal. I won't leave you."

That was a lie, Hannibal thinks, *one of many*, and he wonders if Will had ever spoken a single word of truth to him in the entirety of their acquaintance.

The taste of Will's betrayal, fathomless and unrelenting, mixes with the metallic tang of organ against Hannibal's tongue, and it only seems to fuel his hunger. He is still hungry even after the last of the man's heart has been consumed, and he suspects he will be hungry for a very long time.

At last, he strips off his blood-soaked clothing and he makes his way to the stream near Will's camp. He cleans his body in the water like a baptism, and he turns his eyes to the constellations where they are hidden behind a thick blanket of storm clouds. He wonders whether Will might be searching for any of the same stars: Orion above the horizon, perhaps; or, near it, Jupiter. He supposes that it doesn't matter now. He makes his way back to his car and opens the suitcase he'd known better than to pack, and he withdraws a set of clothes and the heart-shaped toy he'd won at the carnival. He slides the clothes onto his body, but the heart-shaped toy he keeps. The heart-shaped toy he holds close against his chest until he tosses it onto the bed in Will's cabin, followed by the heap of his bloody clothing and a flaming log from the campfire. Soon, Will's little cabin is all ablaze, and Hannibal steps away from it just in time to avoid the inferno that erupts once the flames touch gasoline.

Destruction and rebirth, Hannibal thinks. *What a captivating thought*.

And then, once he is satisfied that the flames have consumed all evidence that might incriminate him, Hannibal gets in his car and drives home. He slides into bed beside his sleeping wife, and he listens as the sky above him opens up and pours forth the long-awaited

deluge. He has survived his incineration, it seems, and all that is left is the rain. He stares at the darkness above his bed while his wife sleeps beside him, and he does not feel any fear at all that someone will figure out what it is that he has done.

After all, he thinks (and he is not longing for Will Graham in these moments, he is not longing for Will Graham at all), *I've built a life above suspicion.*

Interlude: Loose Threads

Chapter Notes

> I am so, so sorry for the outrageous length of time between updates. Life came for me in a big way. I know that a lot of you are likely going through some very tough times right now, so please know that my heart is with you and that I hope this update provides you a bit of a respite from the trials and tribulations of our current reality. Hang in there <3.
>
> Also, please note that today's update is technically a two-parter: an interlude giving you a bit of background on what happened to Will before he came to Redlands, and the chapter where Will makes his journey to Paris. Happy reading <3

One night, at a run-down bar in the backwoods of Virginia, a man named Abel Gideon got a little too drunk. It was his fascination with the bartender that precipitated it. The bartender was a man named Will Graham: a man who, despite ostensibly working for tips, seemed utterly unwilling to feign interest in anything that Abel Gideon had to say. Will Graham was intriguing to Gideon, and oddly charming in his stand-offishness. There was something in the glint of his eyes that reminded Gideon of movement beneath still waters.

Abel Gideon had some still waters of his own, you understand, with untold roiling beneath, so he felt he could relate to Will Graham. And that is why he stayed seated on that rickety bar stool for far longer than he should have, ordering drink after drink and pouring each one down his throat, one after the other, until at last the night wore thin and his vision went soft around the edges. He drank and drank until it was only himself and Will Graham left in the bar, and then Abel Gideon did something he knew he should not do.

For the first time in the entire length of his frustrating, tedious, and endlessly unsatisfying existence, Abel Gideon told the truth. He leaned forward on his elbows, he looked Will Graham in the eye, and he told him that he planned to kill his wife and daughter as soon as he got home. Across the bar from him, Will Graham went very still, but only for a moment. Then, he resumed his wiping of glasses.

“You’ve had too much to drink,” he said blandly, and Gideon shrugged. He felt giddy with his confession, as though an inconceivable weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said, and he rose to stand on legs that gave no hint of his inebriation. “Have a good night, Mister Graham,” he called, and then he made his way out to his car. He opened the driver’s side door and got inside, and he withdrew a gun from the glove compartment. It was the gun he intended to use to kill his family, and it seemed so beautiful to him in that moment that he could not tear his eyes away from it. He found there was no room in his mind for anything at all besides the beauty of the gun and the incomparable bliss of true and utter honesty.

So preoccupied was Abel Gideon with his musings that he did not notice the door to the bar swinging open, and he did not hear the crunch of footsteps as a man made his way across the gravel toward the car. He did not notice anything at all except for the glint of the gun in his hands, right up until the moment that the passenger door opened and Will Graham slid into the seat beside him. Graham took the gun with steady fingers and pressed the barrel to Gideon's temple, and Gideon sat up straighter in his seat. *Will Graham is being honest now too*, he thought, and it made him smile.

"Drive," Graham ordered, and Gideon did not stop smiling. He did not stop smiling as Will Graham led them to a remote backroad, and he did not stop smiling as Will Graham ordered him to step out of the car and kneel by the side of the road.

"Feels good, doesn't it, Mister Graham?" Gideon asked, and Will Graham stared down at him with eyes like an ocean in doldrums.

Still waters run deep, Gideon thought, and he laughed.

"I'm doing this for your wife and daughter," Will Graham told him, and Gideon did not stop laughing.

"Maybe you are, Mister Graham," he said. "Maybe. But maybe just a little bit for yourself, too, don't you think?"

Abel Gideon died of a single gunshot wound to the head, a tasteless death without art or artifice, and his body was left in an unceremonious heap by the side of the road. His car was discovered some days later, abandoned in a parking lot outside a general store. His family grieved, and the story of the cold-blooded murder was printed in newspapers as far away as New York City. But death is not uncommon in this world, and neither is murder, and so it was that Abel Gideon's assassination was very nearly a passing thing.

Very nearly.

But the world is comprised of countless loose threads, threads which threaten constantly to weave themselves together into hidden knots, and so it is that Abel Gideon's death bound itself to Will Graham's life in ways he could not have anticipated. It caught the attention of a private investigator in Baltimore, a woman as tenacious as she was underestimated, and this private investigator drove all the way from Baltimore to that small town in Virginia on her day off just for a chance to speak to the sheriff.

The sheriff didn't want to meet with her, of course. He'd taken one look at her high heels, at her colorful hat and all the signs of her unforgivable femininity intruding on the sacred space of his office, and he asked her to leave. But the investigator did not leave. She was persistent. She had a larger goal in mind. And so she told the sheriff about a man she'd been tracking across the eastern seaboard for well over a year now; she told him of a string of unsolved murders, varying in sophistication and cruelty, that seemed to have nothing in common besides an utter lack of motive and the possibility of their having all been committed by one man.

“I think that man killed Abel Gideon,” she said, and the small-town sheriff eyed her across the expanse of his desk, weighing the frailty of her woman’s fingers against the possibility that she may very well be right.

“This man have a name?” he asked, and the investigator leaned forward in her seat.

“I think his name is Will Graham,” she said, but the sheriff shook his head. He’d caught a glimpse of a red curl peeking out from underneath her hat, and he’d come back to himself in a rush.

What was he doing, he asked himself, talking about murder with a woman? He shouldn’t encourage her in her play-acting. Murder was a man’s province, he reminded himself, and he cleared his throat. “Never heard of anyone by that name, Miss Lounds,” he said.

This was a lie, of course, but not one she needed to know about.

In fact, the small-town sheriff *had* heard of a man named Will Graham, a man who had arrived in town some months ago and was apparently slinging liquor at a hillbilly bar outside of town. However, the sheriff could look into that on his *own* time, *if* he decided it was actually necessary.

Across the desk from him, the investigator had gone very still in her seat. “It’s nearly time for my lunch break,” the sheriff continued after a moment. “Mind seeing yourself out?”

The investigator did see herself out, and she drove all the way back to Baltimore with her hands gripped so tightly on the steering wheel that her small knuckles turned white. She told herself that maybe she was wrong; that maybe it would be easier, that maybe it would be better if she stopped trying to fight a seemingly unwinnable fight and just did all the things that people wanted her to do instead. Get married. Have children. Stop chasing after murder and the people who committed it with the insatiable curiosity of a bloodhound that's caught the scent of a wounded rabbit.

And she nearly did it, too. She put away the case file she’d been secretly compiling on Will Graham, she went back to serving coffee to the men at her office, she went back to smiling placidly when she was handed an endless stream of tedious cases from selfish, shallow men who wanted their wives followed every moment of every day. She nearly let herself be woven out of her own story. But then one morning she arrived at the office an hour earlier than everyone else as usual, and as she rifled through the inbound mail she noticed a letter postmarked from California. The handwriting was unmistakably feminine, the return address marked “Verger Orphanage - Redlands, California,” and she put all the other letters aside as she turned the envelope in her fingers.

The Verger family was a long-time client of the firm, one of their biggest sources of revenue, so the existence of the letter in and of itself was not surprising. What was surprising was that, to her knowledge, the Verger commissions always came from Mason Verger. She hadn’t even known there was a female member of the Verger family. And so, driven by curiosity and the velocity of her own pent-up frustration, Freddie Lounds broke every rule in her office, and she took that envelope home with her instead of filing it for her boss’s review.

She read the letter in her nightgown later that evening, sipping a glass of white wine, and she felt her heart begin to flutter in her chest. Margot Verger was asking for any information the firm may have gathered about a man named Will Graham, and Freddie felt as though electricity were sparking beneath her fingertips when she withdrew the case file from underneath her bed. She felt vindicated. She felt validated. She felt as though, for the first time in the entire length of her stifled, confined, and endlessly hemmed-in existence, she was finally able to do exactly the thing that she was best at doing. And so she packaged her case file on Will Graham, and in the envelope she slipped a handwritten note to Margot Verger.

“Will Graham is a murderer,” it read, “dangerous and unpredictable. Proceed with caution. Regards, F. Lounds.”

She mailed the case file to the Verger Orphanage with her own apartment as the return address, and three weeks later she arrived home to find a check for five hundred dollars signed by Margot Verger.

“Thank you,” read the envelope in scrawling, looping cursive, and Freddie brought it to her chest with tears in her eyes, savoring the unfamiliar sweetness.

Intention and Action

W.

The ocean is darker than Will remembered. It spreads out beneath him like a blanket, woven in threads of purple, black, and grey. *Wine-dark*, Will thinks, and he decides he wants to touch it.

He's too far away to reach the surface, but he does not let this stop him. He slips his feet between the first and second railing of the third-class open-air deck and leans out over the vast expanse of darkness beneath him. The waves look like they're made of velvet, soft and supple and inviting, and Will stretches his arms to them like a supplicant. He is mesmerized by their rhythm, by the way they seem to be reaching for the sky despite knowing they'll never be able to catch it. The wind is whipping his hair around his eyes; he's unsteady on his feet and beginning to lose feeling in his fingers, but he does not pay these things any mind. *It's beautiful*, he thinks, it's *beautiful*, and he does not realize just how far over the railing he has poised himself until he hears a dead man speak.

"Hell of a way to go," the man observes, and at last Will staggers back. His feet slip from the railing and his hands scrabble at empty air. He lands on his back in a painful, ungraceful tangle of limbs. His heartbeat is a deafening gallop in his ears.

Abel Gideon is seated at a small table nearby, still wearing the same clothes he'd worn on the night of his murder and still smiling for all the world as though this were a marionette show and he the man holding the strings. The only change between the living man and dead one seems to be the bullet hole between his eyebrows, leaking blood in sluggish rivulets down his face.

"Do you mind?" Will manages to say, and Gideon laughs.

"Not at all, Mister Graham," he says. "It's just, I was here first, and I couldn't help but notice what you were doing. Seems like an awfully unpleasant way to off yourself, all things considered. Long. Cold. All that darkness. All that *awareness* you're going to die." He gives a delicate shudder, shaking his head. "A shot to the head would be much more *efficient*," he adds with a grin, "as you well know."

"It wasn't my intention to kill myself," Will grits out, and Gideon scoffs.

"It wasn't your *intention*," he repeats, sounding amused. "It wasn't your *intention*. You sure fooled me then, Mister Graham. One would think the act of throwing yourself overboard in the middle of the Atlantic is pretty clear in its intent."

Will rises to stand unsteadily. His legs feel like they're made of jelly. "I didn't throw myself overboard," he says, staggering to the table and collapsing into an empty chair.

"But you wanted to, I think," Gideon says, picking up a teapot and pouring Will a glass. "At least a little."

Did I plan to throw myself overboard? Will wonders, but he stifles the question as soon as he allows himself to think it.

"What's your point?" he asks flatly, and Gideon hums.

"Merely trying to figure out the boundary between *intention* and *action*, Mister Graham," he says. "I've thought about it a lot since you killed me. After all, who gave *you* the right to decide what that boundary is? You may have been the worst bartender known to man, but even *you* must have known that people bare their darkest secrets to the man holding the liquor bottle. Telling you I wanted to kill my wife and daughter wasn't the same as actually *doing* it, but you shot me anyway. Intention doesn't equal action, does it, Mister Graham? And yet here I am, still dead."

"I see you still love the sound of your own voice," Will sighs, and Gideon grins.

"It's the one true love of my life, Mister Graham," he replies. "If you'd really wanted to punish me, you would have cut out my larynx. A bullet to the head was a mercy by comparison."

"I didn't want to *punish* you, Gideon," Will says, and he turns his gaze back to the railing. It's painted white and luminous in the moonlight, and it seems to beckon Will like a siren. *Did I plan to throw myself overboard?* He asks himself again, and then he turns his gaze back to Gideon. "I just wanted to keep you from murdering your family."

Gideon tuts. "Which brings me back to my earlier question. *Does* intention equal action, Mister Graham?" he asks, and Will heaves a sigh, leaning back in his chair and pressing his hands against his face.

"No," he says at last, "it doesn't." Gideon stays silent, studying him across the table.

"I can't help but notice that you haven't eaten anything for days, Mister Graham," he says after a moment. "Is that *intention* or *action* on your part?" Will presses his lips together.

"A little bit of both," Will murmurs, and Gideon gives a thoughtful hum.

"You don't like to eat alone, do you Mister Graham?" he asks, and Will shakes his head.

"No," he says quietly. "I don't." Despite their being seated in the middle of the open-air deck, his voice seems to echo in the air around them.

During Will's time in Redlands, he'd come to associate the act of eating with the presence of people he cared about; with a sense that, even for the briefest of moments, there was somewhere in the world that he belonged. Now that he is on his own, cast adrift again, the

thought of eating makes him sick. Food seems to be just another reminder of his own inescapable aloneness.

Gideon gestures to the decaying centerpiece between them on the table, where rotten fruit and rancid meat coil together in what must once have been an artfully-arranged display. Tiny snails glide smoothly across the mottled surface of the sagging fruit, and Will feels a tendril of disgust unfurl in his stomach.

“Snails feel the same way you do, Mister Graham,” Gideon says. “They, too, prefer eating with company.” He gives a delicate pause, meeting Will’s gaze across the centerpiece. “If only that company could be *Hannibal Lecter*,” he muses, and Will feels his spine stiffen; he feels his shoulders grow tense and a black-tinged fury press searching fingers across the borders of his vision. Gideon’s face spreads into a grin. “Ah,” he says slowly, “*there* you are. *There’s* the man I remember. Hit a nerve, did I, Mister Graham?”

“I should have cut out your tongue,” Will hisses. “I don’t know why I didn’t. I wanted to. I thought about it for *hours*.” Gideon chuckles in the face of Will’s ire.

“You may have *intended* to cut out my tongue, Mister Graham, but you didn’t actually do it, did you?” he asks, sounding endlessly amused. “And so my tongue is still in one piece, and you and I can have this lovely conversation. *Intention* without *action* is a pretty useless thing, isn’t it?”

As quickly as it had arrived, Will’s anger leaves him. His shoulders sink, his hands fall limp into his lap, and the black-tinged rage becomes nothing more than the muted gray of an all-encompassing exhaustion.

“I hope you won’t take this the wrong way, Mister Graham,” Gideon says after a moment, “but I find I can’t help wondering what you’re doing here. What is your *intention* in traveling to Europe?”

Will draws in a breath at the question, sitting up straighter in his seat and moving his fingers in a skirting rhythm across the tablecloth. He clears his throat. “My *intention* is to find out the truth about Hannibal Lecter,” he says, and Gideon raises an eyebrow.

“Awful roundabout way of doing so, don’t you think?” he says. “How exactly does one learn the *truth* of another person by putting thousands of miles between them? I can’t help but think *action* may have been the better choice in this situation, Mister Graham. Wouldn’t it have been easier simply to *ask* Lecter to tell you the truth?”

Will presses his lips together, turning his gaze down to the teacup beneath him. It is full of blood, copper-scented and steaming. “You know why I couldn’t ask him,” he says quietly, and Gideon hums.

“You know, Mister Graham, I don’t think I do,” he says in a drawl. “I know the *excuses* you’ve been telling yourself about why you couldn’t ask him, but I’m not sure I believe them. I’m not sure you do, either.”

Will interlaces his fingers in his lap, digging his nails into the skin on the back of his palms. "Why do *you* think I'm here then, Abel?" he asks, meeting the dead man's gaze, and Gideon's face curves up into a smile. He lifts his teacup to his lips, drinking with relish, and Will watches as he daintily dabs blood from his lips with a cloth napkin.

"Lecter put on a pretty extraordinary show in that interrogation room, don't you think, Mister Graham?" Gideon says at last. "You two never talked about it, but it's pretty unusual for a regular citizen to manhandle a trained police officer like he's made of tin foil. But then again, stranger things have happened, I suppose."

One of Will's legs has begun to bob in a quick staccato rhythm against the wood of the deck, setting the contents of his teacup to moving.

"Then again," Gideon continues, "Lecter was also *awfully* interested in whether or not you'd killed that guard, wasn't he?"

Will turns his gaze down to his teacup, watching the blood there toss and shift like waves relentlessly reaching for the sky.

"And he didn't seem at all... *disapproving* of the prospect, did he?" Gideon asks.

Will finds that he has stopped breathing. His eyes are fixed on the small ocean in his teacup, an ocean which is now casting red droplets up over the rim and scattering them like rain onto the tablecloth below.

"If anything, Mister Graham, I think Lecter seemed almost *hopeful* that you'd killed that guard. And isn't that *strange*, Mister Graham? Doesn't that seem… *unusual* to you?"

Will keeps his eyes fixed on the teacup and the tablecloth, both drenched red now with blood. He stares and stares until at last teacup and tablecloth disappear, until Abel Gideon and his tea party are gone, and Will is left staring only at his trembling fingers, tangled together in his lap like cast-off pieces of string.

"Mister?" a voice says softly, and Will looks up in a daze. A young girl is standing a few feet away from him, her hair blowing wildly in the breeze from the sea. "Are you okay?" she asks. She looks nothing like Abigail, and yet the look of quiet concern on her face is so familiar that Will feels a chasm of unfathomable grief crack open in his chest.

Abigail, he thinks. *I abandoned her. I'll never see her again.*

"Edith!" a voice calls, and suddenly there is a woman at the girl's side, taking her small hand in a jerky movement. "Come away from there," she orders, and she turns her gaze to Will. She seems torn somewhere between fear and disgust at the sight of him, and Will wonders how long he's been sitting here. He'd wandered out onto the deck around three in the morning, but the sun is now high in the sky.

"But that man looks sick," the girl protests, "we should help him."

“I’ve *told* you about talking to strangers,” the woman scolds, her voice low, and the rest of her words are lost to the breeze as she leads the girl away. Will forces himself to stand and makes his way to the railing on trembling legs, hardly noticing when a man steps up into place beside him.

“No more time for daydreaming, Will,” Gideon whispers. “We’ll be in Paris soon, after all. You need to be ready for who’s waiting.”

Will feels like his throat is coated with chalk. “I’ll be ready,” he manages to say, and Gideon raises an eyebrow.

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” he murmurs, and in the next moment he’s gone.

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H.

As it happens, keeping the beast in check is not nearly so difficult a task as Hannibal once feared it would be. He’d kept it locked away for years, barred and bolted and banished from the light of day, out of a certainty that to do otherwise was to allow it to consume everything around him. He was certain that the beast lacked discretion; certain that the beast made no distinction in the endless hunt to fulfill its insatiable appetite. The beast, Hannibal believed, simply wanted to consume.

But Hannibal was wrong in this estimation. For as he had moved through the years of his life after Florence, growing older, constructing his person suit and honing the blades of his self-preservation, so the beast had been learning, too. The beast had been learning patience. The beast had been learning to reflect on years of unrestrained bloodshed, of undiscerning destruction, and it had come to understand that violence takes many forms, some of them beautiful, some of them *tasteless*, and some of them infinitely more satisfying than others.

Take, for instance, the matter of Will Graham. Before the years spent in Redlands, the beast would never have understood the value of biding its time in pursuit of its desired prey. It would have set Hannibal to searching the moment he realized that Will Graham was gone; it would have sent him to traipsing through the migrant camp in search of the faceless woman and setting everything she loved ablaze. It would have set him to striking out against Jack Crawford, simply for bringing Will Graham into his life. It would have set him to breaking Mason Verger’s neck, simply for the pleasure of doing so, simply because he wanted to do it.

But the beast does not wish to do these things now, not after all the years it spent in its confinement. It recognizes that, when it comes to Will Graham, an altogether different approach is required.

And so, after that first blissful taste of flesh in the black chasm of Will's camp outside Redlands, after that brief sip of ambrosia after years of unrelenting hunger, Hannibal found that the beast did not want him to kill anyone else. Instead, it willfully stepped back behind the bars of its cage, and it allowed Hannibal to do all the things he knew he was supposed to do instead. It allowed him to inform Jack Crawford that he visited Will's camp only to find it burned to the ground and completely abandoned. It allowed him to offer Mason Verger his full support in the effort to capture the cunning and criminal Will Graham and bring him back to Redlands alive. It allowed him to maintain the facade he had meticulously constructed over years of self-denial; to continue caring for patients in the hospital, to continue making love to his wife, to continue turning the soil in his winter garden, full of confidence that, with time, his efforts would bear ripe fruit again.

The beast has learned patience, in the years since Florence, and so has Hannibal. Hannibal knows that Mason Verger will catch Will, sooner or later, and he knows that the sight of Will Graham in chains will be infinitely more satisfying than any other short-term slaking of bloodlust could ever be. And so he stays where he is, sheltered and obscured by the architecture of order and expectation, and he waits. He waits to receive the summons from Mason Verger that Will Graham has been captured; he waits to receive the news that there is no such thing as a cockroach with an impenetrable shell.

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W.

Bedelia du Maurier is beautiful, Will thinks, and somehow more suited to Hannibal than Alana Lecter. There is a coolness to her: a distance and a sort of impassivity that mirrors Hannibal's own constellation-like remoteness. Perhaps she reminds Will too much of Hannibal, and that is why he has lingered here as long as he has, making himself inconspicuous across the street from her townhome in the 17th arrondissement and watching her emerge and disappear in an endless menagerie of expensive clothes and stylish hats. Will cannot look away from her. She is as mesmerizing as the sea, he thinks, and every bit as dangerous to him.

"You have to talk to her eventually, you know," Gideon tells him, but Will does not respond. "You came all this way to talk to her," he continues. "What is it you're afraid of?"

"I'm not *afraid* of her," Will bites out, but he knows this is a lie. In truth, he is very much afraid of Bedelia du Maurier, although he isn't sure exactly what it is he fears from her. Is it her beauty? Is it the likelihood that Hannibal had loved her once, the way that he had never loved Will? Or it is simply that he prefers the half-painted portrait of Hannibal that lives inside his memory to the reality of the man that may be waiting for him on the other side of Bedelia du Maurier's door?

“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” Gideon chides, and Will gives him a sidelong glare.

“Quoting Abigail’s book at me again?” he asks, but the dead man only smiles.

“Will,” he says, his tone unusually somber, “we’ve been in Paris for six days now. Verger’s men will catch you if we stay here much longer.” Will draws in a deep breath, letting it out through his teeth.

“I know,” he says softly.

“Don’t you think you should go talk to her?” Gideon prods, and Will sighs.

“Yeah,” he says at last. “I do.”

Gideon does not follow him when he crosses the street and approaches Bedelia du Maurier’s door, but Will can feel the weight of his gaze on his back as he knocks. The door is opened moments later, and Bedelia du Maurier stares down at him with a distinct look of confusion on her delicately sculpted features. She is even smaller up close, Will realizes, and he finds he is unable to speak. Bedelia pulls the door open a little wider and says something to him in French, at which point Will finally manages to force his tongue to move.

“My name’s Will Graham,” he says, and she falls silent, her eyebrows arching toward her hairline.

“You’re American?” she asks in English, and Will nods. “You’re a long way from home,” she says, pursing her lips. “How can I help you?”

Will forces himself to meet her gaze. “We have a mutual acquaintance,” he says. “Hannibal Lecter.”

Bedelia du Maurier goes very still at this, so still that the only movement in her body is the shifting of her throat as she swallows.

“I see,” she says at last, and then she steps aside. “I suppose you’d better come in then, Mister Graham.”

The interior of Bedelia du Maurier’s home takes Will’s breath away. It looks like a palace; or, at least, it looks the way that Will had always imagined palaces might look when he’d heard stories of kings and queens as a child. Vases overflowing with fresh roses adorn every surface, gilded gold mirrors hang from ornate crimson wallpaper, and marble floors shine in chessboard squares of obsidian and bone beneath their feet. Will feels as though he has stepped across the border between two worlds: he feels as though he has been tossed down a rabbit hole and left to fend for himself in an unfamiliar and inhospitable environment.

“Please, Mister Graham, follow me,” Bedelia says, and Will trails after her in silence as she leads him down a long hallway. They make their way to a sitting room, where Will stands awkwardly in the entryway and Bedelia makes a beeline toward a gleaming liquor cart. She pulls the lid off a decanter full of amber-colored liquid and pours herself a glass, downing the

contents in one long swallow before pouring herself another. She turns to face Will with one eyebrow raised. “Care for a drink, Mister Graham?” she asks, but Will shakes his head. “Suit yourself,” she says, and then she crosses the room and seats herself in a plush armchair. Will makes his way to an armchair across from hers and finds that he can think of absolutely nothing to say. The two of them have nothing in common, after all, except for a brief adjacency of roles in the life of Hannibal Lecter, and Will isn’t sure he knows where to begin with that particular topic. Thankfully, Bedelia seems more than willing to steer the conversation for him.

“I’d like you to ask you some questions, Mister Graham, if that’s alright,” she says, and Will clears his throat.

“Sure,” he says, unable to suppress the nervous twitching of his fingers. “That’s fine.” Bedelia draws in a breath.

“Does Hannibal know you’re here?” she asks, and Will feels his brows crease in confusion.

“No,” he says, surprised by the question. “Hannibal doesn’t know where I am, and I suspect he doesn’t care either.” Bedelia du Maurier blinks.

“I see,” she says slowly. “And may I ask what Hannibal Lecter is to you, Mister Graham?” she asks, and Will feels his voice catch in his throat.

“He is…” he begins to say, but then he stops, reconsiders. “He was… he was my friend,” he says.

“I see,” Bedelia says again, and she takes another long drink. “Did Hannibal tell you where I was?” she asks, and Will shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “Hannibal never mentioned you to me.”

“I see,” she says, and her shoulders relax slightly beneath her gauzy blouse. She draws in a breath. “One more question, Mister Graham. Why exactly have you come here?”

Will shifts in his seat. “I was told you two were lovers once,” he says slowly, and Bedelia lifts her eyebrows. She waits for Will to say more, but he remains silent. This conversation has begun to feel like a unique form of torment.

“How is Hannibal these days?” Bedelia asks at last, and Will shifts in his seat.

“He’s… doing well,” he says. “He’s a doctor in California.”

“Is he married?” Bedelia asks, and Will swallows around the acrid taste of his own bitterness.

“Yes,” he says flatly, meeting Bedelia’s gaze. “He is.”

“I see,” she says, and she resettles herself in her chair, leaning forward slightly. “Not to you, clearly,” she drawls, and she is so smug, so detached and so superior in all her beauty and her finery that Will finds he cannot help but hate her. “Were you Hannibal’s lover, Mister

Graham?" she asks, and Will lets out a tight breath. He taps his fingers against his thigh, trying to decide how much to reveal.

I'll be out of Paris by next week, he thinks. *She can't do me any harm.*

"My relationship with Hannibal was... not dissimilar to yours," he says at length, and Bedelia raises an eyebrow.

"I highly doubt that, Mister Graham," she says smoothly, and Will feels a needling tendril of jealousy uncoil itself in the pit of his stomach.

"I had hoped you might be able to... shed some light on Hannibal," he forces himself to say. "I… spent a good deal of time with him in the last few months, but I came away from it feeling like I still know nothing about him. I think I need some sort of closure if I'm ever going to forget him." Bedelia raises her eyebrows.

"And is that your *intention*, Mister Graham?" she asks. "To forget him?" Will digs his fingernails into the skin of his palms.

"Yes," he grits out. "That is my intention."

"Does Hannibal intend to forget you too, do you think?" she asks, and Will swallows.

"He probably already has," he whispers. Bedelia tilts her head slightly, blonde hair falling over one slender shoulder.

"I... suppose I understand why you came to me," she says slowly. "I... knew enough of Hannibal to know the truth of him, in the time we spent together." Her words send a frisson of anger up Will's spine.

"Really?" he says. "That's interesting. The closer *I* got to Hannibal, the *less* I felt I knew the truth of him." Bedelia gives him a cool smile.

"Then perhaps you know him better than you think," she says.

"Why did you and Hannibal separate?" Will asks. "Is it a coincidence that you live alone? Are you still in love with him?"

Bedelia's lips curve into a full smile at this, her eyes glinting. "On the contrary, Mister Graham," she says. "Hannibal and I parted ways quite amicably. I suspect our relationship was not as… passionate as yours."

"Passionate?" Will says with a scowl. "What makes you assume our relationship was *passionate*?" Bedelia studies him for several moments.

"Call it women's intuition, Mister Graham," she says at last.

"Do you think he loved you?" Will asks, and Bedelia shakes her head.

“No,” she says without hesitation. “I don’t.” Will looks away from her then, casting his gaze to the picture window on the far side of the room.

“Why do you think he is the way he is?” he asks, and Bedelia draws in a sharp breath.

“May I ask that you elaborate on exactly what you mean by that, Mister Graham?” she says, and Will forces himself to look at her again. Her fine eyebrows are drawn together, and she is very still.

“Why is he so... overwhelming,” Will forces himself to say, “so all-encompassing?” Bedelia lets out a long breath, and she finishes what remains of her drink in one swallow.

“Mister Graham,” she says when she is done, ignoring his question completely, “is Hannibal’s wife aware of how… intimately you two know each other?” Will looks away again.

“She’s aware enough,” he bites out, and Bedelia hums.

“Oh, I’m sure she is,” she says, and then she rises to stand, making her way back to the liquor cart. Will stays silent, watching as she pours herself another drink, larger this time, and then crosses the room back to her chair. She settles herself gracefully back against the cushions, smoothing her skirt with her free hand and drawing in a breath. “Mister Graham,” she says at length. “If you’re asking me for the truth about Hannibal Lecter, I’m afraid the best I can do is to tell you that Hannibal Lecter reveals precisely as much of himself as he chooses to other people. No more, and no less. Therefore, it is possible that you and I knew two entirely different men, and that the man we knew is different still from the man his wife knows. The truth of Hannibal Lecter is that the truth of him is… subject to interpretation, depending on how much Hannibal has decided that you are allowed to see. I cannot claim to be the expert.”

Will turns his gaze down to his hands where they are knitted together in his lap, feeling a yawning sense of disappointment crack open in the pit of his stomach. “That’s it?” he says. “That’s all you have to say?”

Bedelia clears her throat, crossing her legs and leaning back against the cushions. “There are worse things in the world than surviving Hannibal Lecter, Mister Graham,” she says. “If you want my advice, I’d say you should count your blessings and start over again somewhere else. There are, as they say, plenty of other fish in the sea.”

“What do you mean *‘surviving’* Hannibal Lecter?” Will asks, and Bedelia shrugs, giving him a watery smile.

“Simply a careless choice of words on my part, Mister Graham,” she says. “I only meant that Hannibal Lecter is indeed… overwhelming. It can be difficult to put your world to rights once he has passed through it.”

“You seem to have done just fine,” Will says flatly, and Bedelia smiles.

“It’s getting late, Mister Graham,” she says, “and I’m afraid I have a prior engagement this evening. If there’s nothing else, do you mind if I show you out?”

“That’s it?” Will says. “I wasn’t done.”

“I understand,” says Bedelia, “but I’m afraid that I am pressed for time.”

“Can I come back tomorrow?” Will hears himself say. “We can talk more then?” Bedelia tilts her head slightly, studying him with an unreadable expression.

“Very well,” she says at last. “Come back tomorrow at three pm, and you can ask me anything you’d like about Hannibal. I’ll tell you everything I know.”

Unable to find a reason to tarry any longer in her sitting room, Will rises to stand. He allows her to lead him down the long hallway to the foyer, where she opens the door and turns her gaze on him again.

“It was wonderful to meet you, Mister Graham,” she says, gesturing outside, and Will steps past her to stand on the top step.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says, and her lips twitch.

“Of course,” she says. “Tomorrow.” And then she closes the door.

That night, Will dreams of the great horned beast. He dreams that the great horned beast is running clawed fingers through his hair and speaking in a language Will can’t understand. The next day, he arrives at Bedelia du Maurier’s townhome to find the front door thrown wide, and several men working to maneuver a large sofa out onto the street. Will stops in his tracks, staring, until one of the men finally notices him there.

“Will Graham?” he calls, and Will nods. The men succeed in getting the sofa through the doorway, and they set it down on the sidewalk as the man walks over to Will. He withdraws a folded envelope from his pocket. “This is for you,” he says in thickly accented English.

“Where did she go?” Will asks, taking the envelope, but the man shrugs, already turning away.

“I don’t know,” he says, and he makes his way over to a truck that is already filled to the brim with furniture from Bedelia du Maurier’s sitting room.

Will’s heart begins to pound in his throat, and understanding dawns at last. Bedelia is gone.

Will breaks the seal of the envelope with trembling fingers, withdrawing a piece of stationery. It is blank except for two lines.

Apologies for cancelling our appointment, Mister Graham, it reads. *Best of luck with Hannibal Lecter.*

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